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A

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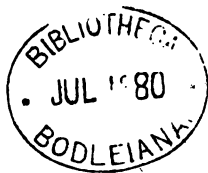
BY

Incog.

Squier, come ner, if it youre wille be,
And say somewhat of love for certes ye
Connen theron as moche as any man.
Nay, sire, quod he, but swiche thing as I can
With hertly wille, for I wol not rebelle
Again youre lust, a tale wol I telle,
Have me excused if I speke amiss;
My wille is good; and lo my tale is this—

CHAUCER.

VOL. III.



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MARRIAGE À-LA-MODE.

PART IV.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER V.

ESTHER's days at Severston passed somewhat monotonously. The mornings she spent in the gardens, sketching; sometimes, and not unfrequently, in the society of Lady ffarington. Then came the one o'clock lunch; afternoon prayers at the Cathedral; calls paid or received, and dinner at seven; after dinner Mrs. Brierly had generally one or two friends "at home," or else she herself went out. She was of a very restless tempera-

ment, and owned that she did not care to face the *ennui* of a quiet evening. The one or two were invariably invited on Esther's behalf, but what possible amusement could an intelligent girl like Esther find in the conversation of gossiping widows and scandal-making old maids? Severston society was divided into a number of "sets." There was the Cathedral set, and the Evangelical set, and the set who attended the Church in South Street—High Church; and there was a still higher church the congregation of which owned unblushingly that they aimed at vestments and practised auricular confession. And there was the set who attended Lady ffarington's church, and worked under her generalship; and there was the Rev. F. Meteor's set, who believed in Moody and Sankey and general sensationalism.

Mrs. Brierly rather liked Mr. Meteor—he had a touching way of making confidences and asking advice, which endeared him to his lady friends. With the unsectarian set Mrs. Brierly would have nothing to do.

Mrs. Brierly would have the different cliques on different nights, and so she had the benefit of hearing news repeated in varied ways, and having facts described from opposite points of view, and a good deal of gossip was somehow circulated. Yet no one ever spoke of Mrs. Brierly as a gossip, or said, “Mrs. Brierly has been telling me,” etc., etc. Hers was simply an intensely inquisitive nature, which was never satisfied without knowing the ins and outs of everything. She rarely asked questions. When she was curious concerning any special subject, she invited the persons, who were capable of giv-

ing her information, to tea, and when tea and muffin, in her elegant drawing-room, had put everybody on friendly terms with everybody, she alluded, carelessly, to the subject which was uppermost in her mind. The game once let loose, there were many, of course, ready and eager to hunt it to earth, and the poor little miserable scandal was pursued and tortured, and torn to atoms and dissected, for the benefit of the fair hostess, until the entrance of the page with sherry and sandwiches compelled them to defer their interesting and exciting conversation for a few moments, or else carry it on in an abbreviated manner as—

“But, my love, you surely do not intend to infer that she—!”

“Indeed I do.”

“And he?”

“ Oh, yes ! ”

“ But she was the worst ? ”

“ Oh, yes, decidedly she was the worst ! ”

“ I mean the one with red hair ? ”

“ Oh, dear, no ! I was not talking of that one. I was talking of the other.”

“ Dear me ! that is still more dreadful ! ”
etc., etc., until at last, Mrs. Brierly informs the page that he need wait no longer, and invigorated by wine and sandwiches the blood-hounds start afresh.

All this was simply detestable to Esther. She was often astonished at the subjects that were discussed before her. She was not used to “ good society ” you see. Since she left school her *friends* had been the Sisters of S. Margaret’s and Cousin Bessie. She had been intimate with no one else. She had a large range of visiting acquaintances, it is true, but

avoided them as much as possible. Her life, although she did not know it, was haunted by a pure ideal which blessed and sanctified her in the most common and trivial of daily tasks. "Life as it ought to be," was ever her standard, and before her pure, solemn eyes, the "ladies" who discussed actual and possible scandals, and peered boldly into matters they had better have been ignorant of, had done well to slink away abashed.

Esther, holding herself aloof from the gossiping crew, would retreat to her embroidery-frame and work with great assiduity.

A bold admirer once told Esther that she was never seen to greater advantage than when the dark, graceful head was bending over the richly-tinted work, and the beautiful arms were moving to and fro with the silk. Esther's only answer was, turning upon him

eyes of great disdain, which effectually quenched the young man, but what he had presumed to say was felt to be true by some of the younger old maids who, wearing curls for caps, and rouge for blushes, glared enviously from their distant corners at the silent girl whom they had been invited to meet, and who—"Such prudery!" as soon as the conversation turned, by the merest accident, upon Flora Lester's elopement—had risen with a gesture of annoyance, and marched away to her embroidery-frame with the air of a Juno.

The verdict in the little world of Severston old-maidenism was, "Dear Mrs. Brierly becomes more charming every day, but that London girl is simply intolerable." And when Lady ffarington began to take her up Esther became still more unpopular among

Mrs. Brierly's acquaintance. Lady ffarington had never noticed any of their visitors. No, not even if they had been near relations, which Esther and Mrs. Brierly were not. No, nor their daughters either, for the matter of that! And Mrs. Shafto recollected that, although she had worked on Lady ffarington's committee for *years*, and had never voted against her *once*, yet Susannah Shafto had never been asked to accompany her mamma to Lady ffarington's little parties, and surely any one could see at a glance that Susannah Shafto, with her Parisian education and great conversational talents, was far superior to that Jewish-looking young woman!





CHAPTER VI.

THERE was one result from that mission-week at S. Lucien's that Alan had never anticipated. On the last day of it Robert Brierly was made acquainted with Alan's secret concerning Evangeline.

Now, I have not been hired either by the Church Union or the Church Association to promulgate their several opinions concerning confession ; I am simply a historian bound to relate certain facts in certain lives, and although confession is, to many pious ears, a thing so terrible that it cannot be mentioned except with bated breath, yet, as a certain case in which it was used happens to tell upon my story, I am obliged to run the risk

of harrowing the tender Protestant feelings of my readers by briefly relating what happened. Those who really cannot bear the least allusion to that dreadful thing, auricular confession, are entreated to miss this Chapter.

It would be infinitely better that they should drop some threads of the story than that, by pursuing it through those dreadful pages, they should be induced to look with less abhorrence upon a thing so terrible as priestly absolution. Protestant friends, let me beg you, with tears in my eyes, not to read another word until you come to Chapter VII; you will miss a very exciting episode, I know, but of what consequence is that ?

After Esther left, Alan took a deeper interest in the Mission. During the first day

or two he had been too much inclined to criticise what he was pleased to call "this mixture of Romanism and Ranterism." But as the Ritual of the Church, and the still more peculiar characteristics of the prayer meetings, became familiar to him, he began, though scarcely aware of it, to take a deep and growing interest in the services. At first his nature rebelled strongly against Dr. Goldie's priestly assumption.

"Who and what was this man?" asked Alan, "who spoke with the authority of a Divine messenger."

The address which finally overthrew his pride was founded upon those words of Nathan, the prophet—"Thou art the man."

It was at the prayer meeting, and Alan, looking up, beheld almost with awe that tall ascetic figure in the cassock leaning forward

and pointing with thin finger into the crowd beneath him, as he reiterated the prophet's words—"Thou art the man."

Long and earnestly he spoke, until the hearts, whom he had first crushed and humbled with the conviction of sin, began to yearn for pardon and relief. Again and again came those words, "Thou art the man," and at every repetition Alan felt his own individual sin more strongly.

This thought, that he had sinned against God, had never occurred to him before. He had sinned against Lily and her child—against himself, against his own soul and body, vanity and self-esteem; and when he had changed his mode of life he had forgiven himself.

This thought of guiltiness towards God, which only God could put away, was a new,

strange thing to him. As Father Goldie, with piercing eyes and pointing finger, reiterated those words, "Thou art the man," Alan's heart instinctively echoed and answered him.

Sin upon sin arose and taunted him, reminding him that although he was doing differently now, yet he had sinned, and the sin remained in the memory of the Great Judge. Man might forget, but God—never! Alan writhed. He could not bear this ; he must free himself—but how ?

Just at that point, the preacher, changing the solemn, earnest tone with which he had sought to send the shaft home to each heart, suddenly raised himself, and lifting hands and eyes to Heaven, cried, in a tone of exultation—

“‘The Lord hath put away thy sin, thou shalt not die.’ God, the tender Father,” said

he, "not only gladly forgives the truly penitent, in His mercy and condescension, which seeks to reassure the fallen, he allows them to hear the very words of pardon. Then they can no longer doubt—no longer be ashamed. God has indeed forgiven them, and they have received their acquittal from the lips of the Great King's ambassador."

Alan and many other thirsting souls drank in the words greedily. Many went from the prayer meeting to the church, as Father Goldie besought them to do, and among them went Alan.

He happened to be the first, and as he entered the dimly-lighted vestry, and saw a tall form waiting to receive him, he, in his misery and excitement, did not notice that it was Robert, not Dr. Goldie. When he had made his confession, and had heard the words

pronounced for which he had been yearning, he still knelt, letting the gracious message echo in his heart.

The weight which had so suddenly revealed itself had as suddenly vanished. He fancied he was like a slave whose fetters had been struck off.

But there were others waiting, as a low voice reminded him—it was that of Robert—and Alan, rising as in a dream, went out. He was in a state of extraordinary spiritual exultation—the body seemed to be thoroughly subordinate to the soul; and passing with a buoyant step through the church, he went out into the street, and walked on and on, whither he heeded not; his head bowed and hands clasped, murmuring to himself continually the words—

“The Lord hath put away thy sin.”



CHAPTER VII.

THE yearning for peace and green fields which had oppressed Esther came also upon Alan, and he fled from noisy London to Evangeline.

There were other reasons, too, which made him desire to get away. When he awoke from his dream and realised that it was to Robert he had made that confession, he was consumed by false shame, and avoided him so pointedly that Robert could not help understanding him. He was hurt and surprised, and on the few subsequent occasions when they were thrown together, endeavoured to dispel Alan's coldness by an unusual air

of frankness and gaiety. But it was to no good.

Every moment Alan, in his ignorance, expected that Robert would be reassuming his priestly character, asking questions and giving him advice. Yet he liked Robert still, and, indeed, the thought crossed his mind more than once that he would have liked to show him Evangeline.

He had all a father's pride in the child, and he brooded sadly sometimes over what his life might have been had he married her mother. He fancied himself taking her about among his friends and saying—

“This is my daughter.”

He longed for her to be seen and admired by some one above the rank of the villagers. As Robert knew all, why should he not see her?

How full of love was Evangeline's greeting to him as she threw herself into his arms—

“ Oh, Master, dear ! ”

For thus she generally called him, and Alan could not bid her give him a holier name.

“ And how is my darling ? ” murmured he, bending over her.

“ Quite well, now you have come.”

“ And Granny Brook and Master Falconer ? ”

“ Quite well, too.”

“ And the pigeons and the chickens ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! but I have something else now. Put me down, please.”

And with ruffled curls and flushed cheeks the child sped along the garden path, blowing shrilly at a little whistle that hung to her sash ; and presently there came from the dis-

tance a quick responsive barking. It came nearer and nearer, and then a little terrier bounced through the hedge and began jumping excitedly about the delighted child.

“Down, Jerry! down, sir! Come to Master,” and child and dog ran together to where Alan was standing; and then Jerry pulled up short, and seemed inclined to raise objections to the new-comer, to Evangeline’s great distress, who, taking the dog in her arms, assured him that when he knew Master better he would certainly love him very very much—

“As I do Jerry,” said she.

Father and child began again their summer wanderings, accompanied, of course, by Jerry, whose society was a never-failing source of delight to Ella.

Up hill, through dale, they went in the

beautiful Devonshire country. Sometimes they would depart for a whole day, Ella mounted in state upon a little white pony Alan had bought for her—a stout, surefooted beast, who pursued its solemn way utterly heedless of the excited little dog who snapped at his heels or tore round and round in mad curves.

One day the four comrades had crossed the top of a high hill, and were descending it on the side furthest from Exridge, when a turn in the road displayed suddenly a scene of exquisite beauty.

Around and below them were the misty outlines of hills, lessening and lessening until they merged in the green valley which stretched undulating and softly tinted to the sea. It was sunset, and the sea glistened like a golden shield.

“Why, Master dear, what is that?” cried the child, checking her pony, and pointing with her whip to the wide gleaming expanse below them.

“That is the sea, Ella,” said Alan, sadly.

“The sea!” and the child clasped her hands with the quick impulsive gesture which reminded him of her mother.

They were standing quietly, the pony nibbling at the short grass and Alan leaning with his arm round Ella. Presently he looked in her face, wondering she was so long silent.

The little hands were still pressed together, but her lips were trembling and her cheek was flushed, and as she turned her tearful face to his, she said, with a sob—

“I had once a mother by the sea.”

Two days later Alan and his child crossed

the hills to the sea. He borrowed a little pony carriage, and Mrs. Brooke packed up their dinner in a basket, and they started soon after sunrise prepared to spend a long day. Evangeline had entreated him to take her, and he could refuse her nothing, but the voice of the waves was now full of reproaches for him, and he wished the day were over. It was a silent journey. The child was occupied in intently gazing on the distance, waiting, in eager expectation, for the moment when the vision of the sea should break upon her. Alan was silent from sadness, thinking of the past happiness that had been his beside the sea. Now and then he looked down at the little being beside him wrapped up in the grey plaid, and the golden head would turn, and Evangeline would look up at him and smile quietly and

serenely, and, perhaps, move a little closer to him, and lean for a moment upon his arm. Ella had such caressing little ways !

At last they gained the summit where they had been two days before, but the sunrise colours had faded, and far away the sea lay pale and dull, scarcely distinguishable from the clouds above it. Alan feared the child would be disappointed ; it looked so different now to what it had done under that brilliant sunset sky when they had seen it last ; but no ! it was the *sea*, that was enough for her. As they went rapidly along, up hill and down hill, now missing the sea altogether, now rising suddenly and seeming to come all at once quite near it, Evangeline's eagerness and excitement were almost beyond her control. At last nothing remained to them but to descend the winding sandy road, to

turn the foot of the cliff, and they were on the beach.

“Oh, do stop and let me get out,” cried the child, and Alan, reining in the tired pony, lifted his child out on to the sand. She ran a little way towards the waves, then threw herself down and burst into tears.

“My darling! my darling,” cried he, hastening to her, and taking her in his arms. As he soothed and caressed her he could not help feeling a pang of disappointment. He had shrunk very much from this expedition dreading the old memories that the sight of the sea would arouse, yet he still could not resist Evangeline’s entreaties—“Take me down beside the sea just once—*only* once.” Making this expedition was, perhaps, the greatest act of self-sacrifice he had ever performed, for Alan was not in the habit of

sacrificing himself, and his only consolation had been the anticipation of Ella's pleasure, and there she was in tears ! As soon as she was able to talk she broke forth into tearful histories of the times when she used to go with her mother by the sea. She imagined she was speaking from her own recollection, but must rather have been repeating the stories Mrs. Brooke had so often told her. Alan never mentioned Lily to Mrs. Brooke, but when his little child, full of some fresh history that had just been told her, sought him out and confided it eagerly to him, he listened with sad attention, and let no word escape him ; and now Ella forgot her tears in trying to recall all that she had ever heard about her mother and the sea.

They wandered on together hand in hand, father and child, the pony following submis-

sively. The bay in which they at first found themselves was a quiet one, but they walked on and on until they passed the point and suddenly came upon quite a different world. In the distance before them stood a new gleaming town, and the sands around were sprinkled over with little groups of people. Alan and Ella paused at first; Alan averse to going among them, but Ella drew him on.

The groups were principally composed of children; children who had taken possession of the vast extent of the bay with all the innocent insolence of childhood, as though the mighty Father had ordained the sublime mystery of the ebb and flow of the ocean simply to afford pleasure to them.





CHAPTER VIII.

AND after all Robert did go down to Severston while Esther was there. One morning Mrs. Brierly received a hasty note stating that he had been summoned into the neighbourhood to see an old friend, whom he feared to be dying, and would therefore be with them that night.

“Dear Robert,” purred Mrs. Brierly, addressing no one in particular, “I knew he would come soon. Do you hear, Esther love? Robert will be with us to-night. Short notice, but we will excuse that. So glad to have him! Dear Robert!”

Esther made no reply. When Mrs. Brierly began speaking she was in the act of

raising her coffee cup to her lips, and she drank, and the hand that held the cup did not tremble, but she felt as though her heart stood still.

“Esther, don’t you hear?” said Mrs. Brierly, a little sharply, and Esther replied coldly—

“I am very glad ; a holiday will do him good,” and turning to her neighbour, a faded *ci-devant* governess, much used and patronised by Mrs. Brierly, asked her if she knew Mr. Brierly.

Oh, yes ! Miss Green knew dear Mr. Brierly very, very well ! and the good woman burst into a flood of panegyric under cover of which Esther, that consummate actress, rising from the table muttering something about it being nearly Cathedral time, retreated to her own room ; then, lock-

ing her door, she sank into the nearest chair. Sitting there with white rigid lips and clasped hands she looked like some wild beast at bay. She could scarcely collect her thoughts. Had she not left London so that she might break herself away from him ; and was he not coming down to her that night—that very night ? And why was he coming ? This Mrs. Brierly had not thought it necessary to explain.

The wild hope flashed into the girl's heart that perhaps he had missed her, and the sweet revulsion of feeling this brought sent the blood throbbing through her veins. Such things had happened. People had loved, and not known that they had loved until the object had been removed from them. But quickly following on this thought came the remembrance of their late interviews.

Not a word or look had escaped her, and in neither word nor look had there been the least token of love. She knew that. Then, Oh! why was he coming? She had been almost happy lately. Why was he coming to undo all her hard work; and when she remembered what that work was she loathed herself in her wounded pride? The Cathedral bell roused her, and she went to the glass wondering if her tearless passion had left any trace upon her features. For some seconds she stood gazing at herself, criticising her face as though it had been that of some indifferent picture or statue. She knew that as she walked to the Cathedral every man she met would glance at her with homage in his eyes. But what was her beauty worth to her if it could not win Robert's love? Perhaps, mused she, if she

had been less beautiful she would have been more attractive to him.

Did he not always apologise mockingly for his little rooms and plain furniture as being unworthy of "Queen Esther?" Queen Esther, who would have deemed herself most honoured by being allowed to lay her crown at his feet.

She was glad she could hide her feelings so well she said to herself, turning to glance once more at the mirror, and noticing, with faint pleasure, that there was no trace of emotion in the calm eyes or folded lips; she did not think she might be paying a heavy price for her self-suppression. And so she went downstairs, and, looking into the breakfast-room, asked Mrs. Brierly if she was going to service that morning.

"When you are married, my love," said

Mrs. Brierly, sarcastically, "and your eldest son comes home after a lengthened absence, *you*—at least, I *hope* so!—will remain at home that morning and see that arrangements are made for his comfort."

"I beg your pardon," said Esther humbly, and then, with a little hesitation, she asked "Could I help you at all?"

"Considering that you are dressed to go out? No! I thank you! Had you asked immediately after breakfast you might possibly have been of use. Yet, stay! If you could do me some little commissions in the town. I shall not be able to leave the house to-day," and she scribbled down a number of errands of trifling importance. "They will do quite well after service," said she, "and, Esther, my love, just shut the door one moment, please. There is one little

favour I should so much like to ask. I trust you will not be offended? *Do* show a little pleasure to-night when dear Robert comes. Really, considering you are such near relations, your manner to him is *very* cold; it is indeed. I assure you I have heard it remarked upon. You forgive me, love, for saying this?"

"I was not aware of any particular coldness in my manner to Robert," said Esther, in her most frigid tones, and not trusting herself to say more, she left the house.

What a comfort the Cathedral calm was to that poor swelling heart.

It was a miserable day. Now yearning for the hour when she should touch his hand, now dreading their meeting, and longing to run away and hide anywhere, so that she might be at rest from this wretched humiliating strife.

She went again to the Minster in the afternoon, and as she passed beneath the sacred porch her enemies fled and her soul entered into Sanctuary. Every pillar and mighty arch spoke to her troubled spirit of peace through a Divine strength.

The service had commenced, and they were chanting the Psalms as she passed to her seat in a quiet corner near the altar. She knelt with her face to the altar. She was quite alone, for these were the "free seats," and nothing intercepted between herself and the shrine-like reredos, with its magnificent silver ornaments and jewelled cross. Flowing about her from the distance came the sweet soft Psalm chant. Oh, if only she had strength of will to break these fetters which galled her, and dedicate herself body and soul to the service of God !

Surely then there would be peace for her; but would the Almighty give peace in return for such a heart as hers? Was she to give herself to God simply because she had been scorned by a man? Nay, He would only be mocked by such a worthless gift as that.

But she set the thought before her as a hope of what might be some day. When she had vanquished her heart, then—and then only—would she lay it at the feet of Jesus.

After the service was ended, she still lingered, walking slowly to and fro amid the rich sunset light which filled the western aisles. She deferred as long as possible the moment when she must cross that threshold of peace and re-enter the noisy, fretful outer world.

But an echoing noise of closing of heavy doors and clanging of keys roused her from her reverie, and reminded her that it was time to go.

It was six o'clock. Four more hours must pass, and then—

“Really, Esther, my love,” said Mrs. Brierly, emerging from the breakfast-room as Esther entered the house, “you must have forgotten entirely that Miss Crewe and her nieces were coming to dine this evening and stay the night. You will hardly have time to dress. We dine, you know, to-day at half-past six. Can you dress in twenty minutes? If not, I suppose dinner must be delayed half-an-hour. Miss Crewe is always punctual, and so, too, are the St. Johns and the Maurices, who are coming.”

“I should much prefer not coming down to

dinner, if you would kindly excuse me. I have a headache."

"Really, Esther," said Mrs. Brierly, pettishly, "and you know they have been invited purposely to meet you; but of course, if you are not well, and you certainly look wretchedly tired—but you ought to have taken care of yourself, you knew they were coming. However—"

"Thank you very much, aunt. I will take care to be in the drawing-room when you return," and Esther hastened upstairs.

Her maid was waiting impatiently for her, and had arranged half-a-dozen dresses, with their several appointments, on the bed, trusting that one among the glittering group would be right.

Esther's "Anything you like," in reply to her enquiry, "What will you wear?"

took a weight off her mind, and the maid fully availed herself of the unusual permission.

The maid, Rachael, was a *protégé*, educated at S. Margaret's, and her only training as a ladies' maid had consisted in taking lessons in hair-dressing and millinery. She was very neat and quick, and greatly attached to her mistress, but she had only left S. Margaret's to come to Esther at the time of the Mission, and was blissfully ignorant of that knowledge of the *usage du monde* that is generally possessed by ladies' maids.

When Esther said, "Anything you like," Rachel's eyes sparkled, for there was a certain lovely white silk, trimmed with lace, which she longed to see her mistress wear, and which Esther had always objected to as being too smart.

“Will this dress do, Miss?” asked Rachael, touching the white silk.

“Anything—anything,” repeated Esther, her forehead resting on her hand.

And so Esther sat in her room in a dull, weary dream, utterly heedless of the rich dress and pearl and diamond ornaments with which her maid was decking her. She bent her head mechanically to allow her to clasp the glittering necklet, and took the bracelets from her hand and slid them on the white wrists.

So wrapped in thought was she, that the maid, emboldened by her silence, ventured to take out that wonderful diamond tiara and place it on her mistress's head. Still Esther made no comment, but merely lifted her hand for a moment to adjust it, and then rising, swept out of the room, utterly

oblivious of the fact that she was overdressed, and that Aunt Selina considered overdressing, more especially in your own house, a terrible proof of bad taste.

Rachael was accustomed to her mistress's moods of distraction. When Esther was engrossed by any one idea she found it almost impossible to free herself from it; and there was so little in the every-day surroundings of her life to make it easy for her to do it. So she was in the habit of quietly giving way to her feelings, and succumbing for a time.

Rachael saw (to use her own words) that her mistress had been very much "put out about something." She speculated as to what the cause might be, and followed her timidly into the drawing-room, and asked if she might not fetch her some dinner.

"Then a cup of tea?"

Having brought the latter, Rachael hung about the room a little, anxious to do something, though not knowing what, until her mistress noticing her, quietly dismissed her.

For half-an-hour Esther sat alone, wrapped in her dream, and then the door opened to allow Mrs. Brierly and her guests to enter. Mrs. Brierly gazed with blank astonishment at the pale queenly figure in bride-like robes who rose to greet them, and recollecting the shabby black silk which she wore, and the crumpled muslins of the Misses Crewe, was scarcely pleased at this unusual burst of magnificence on the part of her niece. She could only hope that it might be intended for Robert's benefit.

The Misses Crewe were delighted to make Miss Brierly's acquaintance. Miss Crewe, senior, had heard much of her from her

nephew, Mr. Wybergh. Did Miss Brierly remember meeting Mr. Wybergh at the house of their mutual friend, the Rev. Robert Brierly, who they hoped to have the pleasure of seeing that evening?

Miss Crewe perched herself upon a high chair close to the weary girl, and prattled gaily.

Nine o'clock struck. Another hour yet. Will the day never end?

When the gentlemen joined them, Mrs. Brierly petitioned for music—

“Esther, my love, can you sing us something, or are you too tired?”

Esther signified that she was not too tired, and the gentlemen rushed gallantly forward to open the piano and arrange the music.

Esther paused a moment before sitting

down, and, turning to Mrs. Brierly, asked what she would like her to sing.

What spirit of mischief was it that prompted Mrs. Brierly to suggest the "Douglas" song?

Esther's pale face became a shade paler, but she sat down without flinching, and saying that she did not need the music, sang without one trembling or indistinct note—

Only come back to me, Douglas—Douglas!
Douglas! Douglas! tender and true.

Miss Sophia Crewe (the sentimental one) criticised next day with some severity the great want of expression and feeling with which Miss Brierly "rendered" that most sweet and touching song. How could Miss Sophia know that if the lips that had sung it had allowed themselves to falter one whit

the singer would have broken down utterly. But dear me! Miss Sophias never do comprehend the depths of feeling that are often screened by cold reserve—depths that are unfathomably below their deepest griefs.

Esther remained in attendance while Miss Sophia sang something sentimental and Miss Tommy something comic, which latter would have been intensely offensive to her had she heard a word of it; and so—ten o'clock struck.

In ten minutes the train would be due—in another ten minutes Robert would be there.

Surely it was time all these people were going? and then she remembered that the Crewes were to stay the night. Miss Dora Crewe sat down to the piano, and played a long string of airs from some opera. The

music recalled to Esther the story of the play—a lovers' meeting, a tragedy, and the parting.

The expression that Miss Dora was quite incapable of imparting to the music was supplied by Esther's memory, and the ringing tones of the great actress's voice came back to her; but surely it was time he was here—what time was it? She had not on her watch; she could only reckon by the Cathedral, and it seemed an age since it had last struck.

The St. John's carriage was announced, and they rose to go; and Esther, in the bustle of their departure, fancied she heard the clock strike again, but was not sure. Then the other people went, and Mrs. Brierly subsided into a purring conversation with Miss Crewe.

Esther, making a great effort, steadied her voice, and said, in an indifferent tone—

“I think Robert cannot be coming to-night. It must be nearly eleven.”

“Eleven? Oh, dear no! Not half-past ten.”

And Harris, the butler hired for the occasion, entering just then, she turned and appealed to him. Harris jerked a large silver watch out of his pocket and replied that it was five minutes to eleven.

“Really! How odd! But, no doubt, the train is late. Robert would certainly have telegraphed had he missed it. He is *so* considerate. Dear Robert!” and the affectionate mother, turning to Miss Crewe, resumed the purring conversation that Esther had interrupted.

Esther leaning back in her chair, strained

her ears in vain for the longed-for sound of wheels stopping at the door. Then the conversation became less gushing, and the Misses Crewe confessed that they were tired, and retreated upstairs, and only Esther and Mrs. Brierly remained. Esther felt nervous and uncomfortable.

“What shall you do, Aunt Selina?” she asked.

“Do?” said Mrs. Brierly with a yawn. “Go to bed if he does not come in ten minutes.”

“Then you think it is all right?”

“All right? Of course it is all right.” And she moved about the room re-arranging the knick-knacks on the table and chimney-piece and putting away books.

“And you don’t think, then, that if he had missed the train he would have telegraphed?”

“I am really too sleepy, my love, to think about anything. I must send away Harris, though, or there will be no wine left in the house,” said she with a little laugh.

Mrs. Brierly had a mania for locking up, and for the next ten minutes there was a hushed domestic fuss of opening and shutting of cupboards, and much half-suppressed colloquy, of which only the tone of the speakers reached Esther. Mrs. Brierly, dictatorial—Harris acquiescent—cook cantankerous.

“I have told them they need not sit up,” said Mrs. Brierly, at length returning to the drawing-room. “There is no chance of Robert’s coming to-night; he *ought* to have telegraphed; but men never think. Dear me, Esther, you look like a ghost. Are you sure you are not ill?”

“Quite sure, thank you,” replied Esther, speaking with an effort.

“Then do, pray, go to bed at once, and, for Heaven’s sake, look different in the morning. I don’t know what Robert will think I have been doing with you.”

Esther made a sickly attempt at a smile and retreated. Rachael was waiting for her, but was dismissed. Esther could not bear the idea of going to bed. She could not tell why, but she was certain that Robert would come that night. Her room faced the street, and she was resolved that if he came by the next train he should, at least, find one light burning in expectation of him. She wondered when the next train would be due. As soon as she had heard Mrs. Brierly go to bed she would go down to the dining-room and look for the time-table.

Mrs. Brierly's room was next her own, and as soon as she heard her aunt enter it she gathered her silk skirts closely around her and went stealthily down-stairs. She soon found the time-table and sat down to speculate as to what was the most probable train for Robert to come by. One was due almost immediately. If he came by that he would, most likely, come up to the house ; but if he came by a later one he would go to an hotel. Just as she came to this conclusion there was a sound of footsteps hastily passing the dining-room windows—passing, and then pausing at the door.

“ Could it be *Robert* ? ” she asked herself, and her heart throbbed so violently that she was obliged to sit down a moment. Then came a knock at the door. Not a proper knock with the knocker, but a short hasty

one with the knuckles. The visitor, whoever it might be, had, no doubt, seen the light in the dining-room windows, and did not wish to disturb the whole house at that hour. If it was Robert how was she to explain the fact of her being down-stairs at that hour? But there came another knock at the door, and she rose and went with a trembling hand to undo the bolts. What with her nervous eagerness and her anxiety to make as little noise as possible, it seemed to her an age before the door bolts were unfastened. When she was able to turn the handle the door was pushed open, and Harris entered! When he saw who had opened the door for him he started back with an inaudible exclamation—perhaps an apology, and Esther hastened to explain that being downstairs and hearing some one at the door she had opened

it to save the servants the trouble of coming down. Esther, having given her explanation, waited, somewhat haughtily, for Harris to give his, and account for his reappearance at the house. Harris coloured and hesitated, and then stammered out that he had a message for the cook.

“She has been in bed an hour,” said Esther coldly. Then there was an awkward silence broken by Harris.

“You think, Miss, I could not speak to the cook?”

“Certainly not. If you have a message I will send it.”

“Well, really now!” said the man, much agitated. “I am sure it is the most unfortunate thing, but there is no time to be lost, and if you won’t let me see cook, I must speak to you, miss. The fact is, there has

been—at least, as I was leaving here I run against a friend of mine, a railway porter, and he told me there was a—a—I don't suppose for a moment anything serious—but just a slight accident. You won't be alarmed I hope, miss. I am sure when I came back to the house I never thought I should have to say it to you."

Strange to say, Esther did not feel at all surprised. She had been living all that day in the shadow of a great fear, and this was only its fulfilment. She felt as though she had known always that this was to be.

"Where did the accident happen," asked she calmly.

"Just outside the station here. The train run off the line. What I meant to say when I knocked at the door (thinking it was cook) was that I would run down and get to know

particulars. Of course, miss, you won't let Mrs. Brierly know of it?"

"Oh! no! No! Pray go at once. No one shall know about it. I will wait here till you come back. Take the latch key, and return as soon as you can."

When Harris had gone she returned to the dining-room and threw herself on her knees, with a low moaning cry, "Oh, Robert, Robert." How passionately she entreated for his life only God and the angels know. That half hour was a terrible vigil, and the tears that she would not allow to fall burned themselves into her brain, and horrible pictures of torture rose before her. Perhaps if she were beside Robert now, she thought, suddenly, she would not be asking for his life, but his death. Death, as an end to torment—and she writhed, and almost

fainted. Often she lifted her head as the sound of footsteps approached, and listened with bated breath as they passed the house. At last, from the distance, came again the tramp of feet, but this time it was a heavier tread, and her heart stood still as she instinctively likened it to that of men carrying *something*. Carrying what? She shuddered and prayed that these footsteps might also pass by as those others had done. They came nearer—nearer—nearer with slow monotonous beat. They were passing in front of the dining-room windows. She felt sick and faint with dread. How slowly they went! When would they have passed by? Alas! they did not pass, they paused at the door, and Esther heard the latch key put in the key hole, and turned, and some one enter. There was a whispering conversation. They

were crossing the hall—they were coming to her—and an unutterable horror possessing her, she crouched down in the corner where she had been kneeling—crouched down in her silk and diamonds, and covered her face with her hands. *What* were they bringing in? The air seemed full of whispering noises. She heard the handle of the door turned, and then a voice, that was to her as that of the dead, said, “Esther!” She looked fearfully up, and there, in the dim light, stood Robert. She gave a little cry, tried to rise, and fell swooning before him.





CHAPTER IX.

THE accident had been only a very slight one. The person most injured was the stoker, and he insisted on being taken to his own home, and not the hospital, and Robert had volunteered to walk beside him. As they were passing his mother's house the man fainted, and Robert came in with Harris to get some brandy. Harris had told him that it was Miss Brierly who had heard him at the door, and that she was waiting to know that he was safe.

Esther had been ill all day, and there seemed nothing strange in the fact that she had fainted at last, overcome by the excite-

ment of the news of the accident. Mrs. Brierly rather approved of young ladies fainting occasionally. It was, she thought, a sign of sensibility.

She conjectured that it was not at all improbable that this accident and the half-hour of suspense (it was only natural that she should be anxious about her cousin's safety) might be the means of inducing some affection for her son in Esther's usually cold heart.

Esther soon rallied, and seemed more desirous of excusing herself than of enquiring into the particulars of Robert's escape.

"She had come down for a book, and had heard Harris's knock. She had been very anxious for half-an-hour (here she shivered involuntarily), and then when they brought that poor man to the door, why—"

“My dear, it was only natural that you should feel nervous. Of course it was a dreadful thing, and you would naturally shrink from seeing a poor creature in the state I fear he is in. I wonder that Robert should have brought him into the house—I really do. Particularly when Harris had told you of Esther’s kindness in sitting up!”

“My dear mother, he had only sprained his ankle and got shaken. He ought to have gone home in a cab, but his mates seemed to think it was the proper thing to carry him, and they shook him so that he fainted.”

Mrs. Brierly had come down to get out the brandy in a bewitching *robe de chambre* of violet merino, and it was with some difficulty that Robert could prevent her raising the whole house. She must hear the full account.

“But Esther is ill,” objected Robert.

“Oh, no,” said Esther, from the sofa, where Rachael was bathing her forehead with *eau de Cologne*, “I feel much better. I should like to hear all.”

So Robert’s account was given, interspersed with criticisms from Mrs. Brierly.

“And now Esther must go to bed,” said Robert, and leaning on his arm she went upstairs.

“I am so thankful you are safe,” she whispered.

It was all she could trust herself to say ; and Robert’s warm pressure of the hand, and “God bless you !” nearly overcame her.

The next day Esther was so excessively languid and weak that Mrs. Brierly insisted upon calling in Dr. Sampson. He was a

portly, elderly man, with an impressive cough, and a painful partiality for snuff. At another time Esther might have found amusement in his little mannerisms and eccentricities ; but on the occasion of his first visit she was too utterly prostrate to notice anything. In a half dream she replied to his questions ; but just as he was on the point of leaving she roused herself and said—

“ May I ask you a question, Dr. Sampson ? ”

“ By all means, my dear young lady.”

And Dr. Sampson reseated himself, and assumed an attitude of attention, fortifying himself by a prodigious pinch of snuff.

“ I want to ask you,” said Esther, nervously, “ if I have anything wrong with my heart ? ”

“ Now, I protest,” said Dr. Sampson,

clearing his throat, "I protest against young ladies asking such questions. Wrong with your heart! You in the height of youth and beauty! Absurd!"

"Oh, please, I would rather know—I would indeed."

Dr. Sampson laid his fingers on Esther's pulse, counted its beatings for a minute, and then proceeded, solemnly and deliberately—

"My dear young lady, I never tell lies—I pride myself upon not doing so. Now I own to you that I fancy there is just now a slight, a very slight irregularity in the action of the heart. It may be only my fancy, mind you; and is, at any rate, if it exists, consequent on your present state of debility. Strengthen yourself you strengthen your heart, eh? There is nothing, I assure you, to cause you

the slightest anxiety. How well I recollect," continued he, leaning back in his chair, and becoming suddenly oblivious of the fact that "he never told lies," "How well I recollect being called in, some years ago, to attend a most elegant young lady who was on a visit to the Duchess of Brantingham. Her illness was of a precisely similar nature to that of my present interesting young patient here, and was brought on by a shock to the nerves. I prescribed for her the very identical medicine that I intend prescribing for you, my dear young lady, and I anticipate with the same result—(her case, let me remark, by the way, was infinitely worse than yours). She is now the indefatigable secretary of several Archery, Croquet and Tennis Clubs; the mother of a dozen children; the energetic Lady Patroness of charities innumerable;

and has also won for herself a modest reputation as an elegant authoress. Yes! yes! you must have the identical medicine that I prescribed for her," and promising to come and see her on the following day, Dr. Sampson took his leave.

Esther turned her head wearily on her pillow.

"Was this all?" she asked herself.

Ah! she had dared to hope that an end was coming.

Was it possible that people could continue to live when life had become so void of happiness?

She could scarcely restrain her tears as she thought of the weary stretch of life that lay before her. But, perhaps, Dr. Sampson was mistaken. She hoped he was; she felt wearied out.

In the evening Robert came and sat beside her and read, and Esther, lying with closed eyes, was placidly happy. She did not enter into the sense of the words. It was poetry, and he read it with a melodious intonation that was very composing. I cannot tell whether Robert guessed her secret; but he was, just then, inexpressibly gentle and tender with her.

Some days later, when, although, against her wish, she was no doubt much better and stronger, he, as he sat alone with her at dusk, began to talk about himself and his past life.

Esther was much interested, and encouraged him timidly, and so he went on from his college days to his ordination, his first curacy, his acquaintance with the Lumleys; and then, after a slight pause, he

spoke quite calmly and simply of his great love for Emily Lumley, and how, upon his disappointment, he had resolved never to think of any woman again, except as a friend only.

“Since her death,” said Robert, his voice faltering a little, “I have felt that she was again given to me. I know that all love in Heaven will be entirely subordinate to the love to God ; but, that served, I am convinced that our Father will not deny to His children the enjoyment of His own great gifts. We were divided here ; but *there* !—” and Robert rose and walked to the window in silence.

It was only for a moment, and then he came back to the side of Esther’s couch, and continued—

“I have a letter that Cousin Bessie

wrote to me about her that you shall see when you are stronger. Cousin Bessie was there when she died, and she heard so many stories of my poor child's kindness and piety. Everybody loved her. God grant us to be together hereafter."

It was nearly dark, and Esther could only see the outline of his face, as with folded arms he leaned back in his chair. They sat in silence for some minutes, until the candles being brought in, Esther was astonished to notice, through the tears which she could not restrain, the serene happiness of Robert's face.

Mrs. Brierly had begun to hope. The object of her life just then was, as we know, to bring about the marriage of Robert and Esther, and it was not surprising that she should put the interpretation on those read-

ings and conversations that she wished them to have. After the first few days of Robert's visit had passed, and she had exaggerated to herself the things that had really happened, and persisted in imagining many that had never occurred at all, she actually became annoyed with Robert for not confiding in her. On that evening when Robert spoke to Esther about poor Emily it so happened that Mrs. Brierly followed the candles into the room. To the eye of an indifferent observer there would have appeared nothing very loverlike in the aspect of Robert and Esther just then. Esther, still white and languid, lay on the sofa, with traces of agitation on her face, while Robert, sitting at a little distance from her, leaned back in his chair with folded arms and closed eyes.

Mrs. Brierly, however, chose to be convinced

that something had happened, and as soon as the servant departed, she said archly, and made feint of rising from her chair as she spoke—

But, perhaps, my dear, I am interrupting you ? ”

“ Oh, I am not doing anything,” said Robert, innocently. “ But that reminds me there were some letters I ought to have written for this post.”

“ I was not thinking of the *post*,” said Mrs. Brierly pointedly.

Robert yawned and took out his watch.

“ Well, it is too late to begin to-night,” said he with a sigh of relief, and resumed his former attitude.

There was a short silence broken at length by Mrs. Brierly.

“ Do you know, Robert, I should so much like to ask you a question.”

“Indeed!”

“And you must promise to answer it!”

“You must let me hear it first.”

Certainly Robert’s absent sleepy manner was not encouraging, but Mrs. Brierly having persevered so far, was determined to have her maternal heart set at rest. Laying down the work with which she had been fidgetting, she said, looking up at him playfully—

“Robert, dear, when are you thinking of getting married?”

Robert was thoroughly awake now.

“You should have asked me that question eight years ago, mother,” said he.

“But—” and she glanced from him to Esther in a manner, the meaning of which could scarcely be mistaken—“you surely do not mean to say—”

“I shall *never* marry,” said he, interrupt-

ing her sternly, "*never*—and Esther knows why."

This answer was so utterly unexpected that Mrs. Brierly at first scarcely realised the full meaning that the words were meant to convey; when, at last, it did dawn upon her, and she comprehended how utterly all the trouble of the last few weeks had been thrown away, then—I regret to have to write it of so elegant a woman, and so eminent an Anglican—she trembled with suppressed rage to the finger-tips.

At first she made a pretence of continuing her work, then suddenly throwing it on the ground, she left the room. Robert was sincerely glad when she did so, for he knew his mother's tempers of old, and dreaded lest she should have burst into angry abuse of poor Emily, and his own utter folly re-

garding her. So when the door closed upon her, albeit with a bang, he breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Brierly did not reappear until Esther had retired to bed, then she came back.

“Robert,” said she sharply, “do you mean to tell me that there is nothing between you and Esther?”

“Nothing whatever, and never will be.”

Then Mrs. Brierly let loose the dogs of hell. In other words she abused her son in almost unmeasured terms. As long as her rage was directed only against himself, he made no reply, but when she began to sneer at Emily he rose and walked to the door.

“Do you wish me to leave the house, mother?” asked he; but Mrs. Brierly was not to be diverted from her purpose, and in a low hissing whisper reminded him that Emily

had cast him off of her own free will, and so Robert, to save himself from uttering the bitter rejoinder that rose to his lips, left the room. Mrs. Brierly certainly was foiled. Had she not been devoting herself for weeks to a girl whom personally she disliked, and all because she hoped to secure her for her son? And now, when the girl seemed half-inclined to like him (so said Mrs. Brierly to herself) he refused to take her.

It was abominable conduct! She considered she had been imposed upon, and now, when, as it was only too evident the case was a hopeless one, she began to discover flaws in her diamond, and recalled instances of Esther's coldness—intrusiveness—indolence—pride; condoled with herself for having been obliged to keep her so long. The truth was Esther had several times suggested

leaving ; she had other visits to pay, and had planned to make a little tour in Wales with Cousin Bessie, and only remained so long at Severston in consequence of Mrs. Brierly's urgent entreaties that she should do so, for Mrs. Brierly had determined that, if she could prevent it, Esther should not leave her house until Robert had been to visit them.

How well and cleverly all had been arranged. What a pity, as events proved, that she should have been reckoning without her host. There was a very perceptible change in her manner the next morning, a change which greatly angered Robert and pained Esther. The morning's post brought letters from Miss Crewe to Mrs. and Miss Brierly inviting them to come to her on a quiet visit for the benefit of Miss Brierly's health.

"*I shall not go.* Esther, of course, is at liberty to please herself," remarked Mrs. Brierly to the coffee-pot.

"Do go, Esther," said Robert; "it is a charming place, and will do you good," and so Esther accepted Miss Crewe's invitation.

Oddly enough Miss Crewe had taken a fancy to Esther. Now the Crewes were nobodies. Rich Manchester folk, utterly destitute of grandparents, but blest with a mother, who negotiated most cleverly for her children in the matrimonial market, and who, having landed those two fine fishes, Mr. Wybergh and Mr. Linwood, and laid them at the feet of her pretty, well-educated, well-dowered younger daughters, died happy. For Charlotte, the clever, eldest sister, her manœuvres had, alas! been in vain. Perhaps she had proved too clever, and had the bump

of government too strongly developed to be pleasing. It is not every man who cares to be ruled by his wife.

At any rate, the eligible suitors declined to come forward, and Miss Crewe remained Miss Crewe, while the two younger ones, who, even their own mother denominated "pretty fools," were led off in triumph.

Miss Crewe, being, as I said, nobody in particular herself, had, of course, the greatest and most astonishing reverence for rank in others. Mrs. Brierly had very frequently alluded to her own titled relations, and always claimed Esther as her niece, and was ever ready to hint (behind Esther's back) of the enormous fortune which she enjoyed. Had Miss Crewe known that Esther's grandfather had been originally a common working jeweller I don't suppose she would ever have

troubled herself to invite her to Holme Priory.

Esther's present state was one that was peculiarly suitable for making a favourable impression upon Miss Crewe. What Miss Crew required, tacitly or otherwise, at the hands of everyone with whom she came in contact, was submission to her governance.

I won't say that in some cases the victims were not ultimately the better for it, nay, in some rare instances they even liked it; and, strange to say, thus, just now, it was with Esther. When she went to the Priory (Miss Crewe drove over and fetched her) she was so excessively weak that it was really a relief to be spared the exertion of thinking for herself. She was glad to be told what to eat and drink, when to go out, and when to go to bed, and she acquiesced so calmly that

Miss Crewe was quite charmed with her, and it at last occurred to her that, if Alan were to marry, and he would, no doubt, marry some day, he could not do better than take this mild, submissive Miss Brierly, and install her at the Priory as a sort of deputy-mistress. Out of courtesy she would, of course, be permitted to assume the title of mistress; but Miss Crewe proposed to herself still to occupy the chair of office in the study, and to continue to be the universal genius of the place.

She wrote to Alan accordingly, telling him in ambiguous phrases that she had a dear young friend visiting her in, she feared, declining health. She believed they were already acquainted. It was to Miss Esther Brierly that she alluded.

“Esther Brierly in declining health!”

ejaculated Alan, and then he remembered that he had only Aunt Crewe's word for it. Still, if Miss Brierly was staying at the Priory, he thought he would go north for a week and renew his acquaintance with her.

He did not write to his aunt to tell her he was coming, wishing to escape the fussy welcome with which she was wont to receive him on his own door-step.

"Miss Crewe was out," answered the servant, "but Miss Brierly was in the library."

"Say that I am here and ask if she is engaged."

Miss Brierly was not engaged, and would be happy to see Mr. Wybergh.

When Alan entered the shaded library he could not refrain a start at the sight of the pale girl on the sofa in her shroud-like robes.

Esther smiled faintly, and extended a fragile hand to greet him.

"I dare not rise," said she, with a little laugh, "for your aunt put me here and forbade me to move for an hour."

"I am afraid you have been very ill," said Alan gently.

Esther, in her magnificence, had moved him little, but it touched his sentimental heart to see her lying thus.

"Oh, I am nearly better now. I shall soon be all right, and the air here is delightful, and Miss Crewe is so kind."

"I believe she is a good nurse," said Alan, leaning over a vase of flowers and fidgetting with them.

He was so painfully struck with the change in Esther that he could scarcely bear to look at her. Happily just at that moment a whining

and scratching was heard at the door, and Esther said—

“Oh, please, that is Bustle; would you let him in !”

Bustle, who might have been Jerry's twin brother, scuttled across the room and scrambled excitedly up on Esther's sofa and conveniently monopolised the attention both of Alan and Esther.





CHAPTER X.

A YEAR has passed. It is again July, and again Alan and Esther are together at Holme. Alan and Esther have seen a good deal of each other during the past year. They met at Scotland during the autumn; in London in the winter; at watering places in the spring. Dr. Sampson was quite right in his opinion of her case, and she is now, not only quite strong and likely to live, but is not averse to do so.

Alan, believing himself to be wedded for life to his dead Lily, glided gradually and almost imperceptibly into a far stranger and more absorbing passion than he had ever felt

for her. Aunt Crewe was undoubtedly a clever woman, and she knew that it would be almost an impossibility for one so susceptible as Alan to live for a few weeks under the same roof with so charming an invalid as Esther without becoming interested about her—if nothing more. He did indeed become interested in her, so much so that he found that he would be obliged to go for his autumn shooting into that very part of Scotland where Esther intended staying, and when she returned to London for the winter, business took him also to town.

This summer Esther had been unusually gay for a few weeks, and had become so pale in consequence that Cousin Bessie, fearing for her health, had persuaded her to accept a pressing invitation from Miss Crewe for a long visit to Holme. Miss Crewe had visited

Esther in London that spring, and had attended the May Meetings from her house, and had received there sundry dismal men in black coats and white chokers, who had the privilege of being acquainted with her. They had suggested to Miss Crewe that it would be advisable to try and convert Miss Brierly, and Miss Crewe, in return, had read them a lecture on charity, and bade them leave Miss Brierly to her. And now she was at Holme Priory again and Alan was there too, for he had been suddenly smitten with a desire to look after his land and his tenants.

He was excessively happy, though in what his happiness consisted he did not trouble to ask himself. Little Evangeline was almost forgotten. He had only been to her for a few days that summer. He had "not had time to stay longer;" and Esther? Esther had

determined that her love for Robert, being the first, should also be the last of her life. What girl of twenty ever supposed it possible that she should love again? At five-and-twenty, women of the world, suffering in an *affaire de cœur*, look forward and then look back, and remind themselves that they have been wounded previously, and recovered, and argue that the like will happen again, and seek in a fiercer whirlpool of dissipation to forget their heart sickness.

But our pure Queen Esther had no such chequered existence to look back upon. Her love for Robert had grown with her growth, and become part of her being—it was her religion. She had resolved for some time not to think of him—if she could help it—but still when anything perplexed her the question would immediately arise in her thoughts,

“What would Robert say?” She was certain she never would love again, perfectly certain! yet when she came on this visit to Holme Piory it occurred to her more than once to wish that she had a brother, and to wish that this brother should have resembled Alan Wybergh.

So the sunshiny days passed and Esther was placidly happy. She found in Alan a most agreeable companion, and a sympathetic friend. He was, to say the truth, not quite up to *her* standard in his opinions on Church matters, so she applied herself with great zest to his conversion. Nothing surely ought to be so gratifying to the feelings of a right-minded man as the knowledge that a woman, who is as *beautiful* as she is *good*, is anxious about his spiritual welfare.

It was a matter of the most serious im-

portance to Esther that Alan should thoroughly understand the vestment question and have "correct views" about candles and incense. She had a Jewish love of magnificence, and why should she see it stinted in the service of her God? Alan, who had no leaning whatever either to one party or the other, enjoyed the little ecclesiastical duels. He invariably argued with her, and contradicted her, if possible, so that he might see how grand Queen Esther could look when her usually calm nature was stirred. Moreover the duels could not be conducted in Miss Crewe's presence, and therefore generally took place *tête-à-tête* among the Priory roses. Esther was supposed not to be well when she first came to the Priory that summer, and both Alan and Miss Crewe conspired to treat her as an invalid. Alan was only too glad to

have an excuse for waiting upon her, and the latter infinitely preferred her visitor to be in a state of dependance and submission.

One morning in August Esther was walking among those Priory roses, a letter in her hand. It was from the "Mother" at St. Margaret's, reminding her that she had promised to spend a short time in the summer at the sisterhood, and asking how soon she would be able to fulfil it. Two sisters were knocked up with overwork and required a rest. It was a rule of the house that the associates should be ready to help at the Home if called upon to do so. The Priory gardens had never looked lovelier than they did that morning, thought Esther, as she glanced round her from her nest among the roses.

"Tired?" Esther started. She was condoling with herself on the melancholy necessity

which required her to end her visit at Holme and set off for hot dirty London; she had not noticed Alan's approach. "Oh, no! not at all tired, thank you!"

"Are not the gardens lovely to-day?"

"Very," said Esther, gazing absently into the distance, and then rousing herself with a sigh, she added, "Yes, they are *provokingly* charming to-day. I have had a letter from London, and shall be obliged to go away in a day or two."

Alan looked dismally blank; at first he made no reply, and then he repeated her words in a low tone—

"Obliged to go away in a day or two!"

For some seconds they sat in silence, Esther was playing with a flower that lay on her lap, pulling off the leaves one by one, which, with her argued great absence of mind,

for she was not wont to be cruel, even to a flower.

Alan glanced at her and thought she looked sad, and the sight of her sadness sent the blood throbbing through his veins. Lily and Evangeline were forgotten.

“Oh, how I wish—” began he in low trembling tones.

Esther started, coloured, and said, hastily—

“Ah! there is Miss Crewe coming! I have not seen her since the post came in.”

In another moment Miss Crewe was beside them. Alan bent his head and bit his lips, then rose and strolled away, and Miss Crewe took his seat. Alan, sauntering about turned now and then to steal a glance at Esther. She was dressed in a thick, white morning gown, relieved only by a quantity of chains of black beads wound round and round her neck in

graduated circles. She always affected a grand simplicity in dress. Her beauty, Alan thought, scorned such trivial accessories as flowers and ribbons. But how pale she was! The quick colour that had come on her cheek a few minutes before had now faded entirely away, and she leaned back among the overhanging blush-red roses, white as a snow queen.

A sudden fear forced itself upon Alan, and he shuddered involuntarily. Was *death* about to dispute his bride with him? He was madly jealous of every man whose name Esther had ever mentioned, from Robert Brierly to the refugee Count, who had taught her Italian; but could it be that there was one more suitor still, more terribly urgent than all? This fear only served to make his determination more fixed—he must win her,

he repeated to himself; surely his love and care would cheat even death itself. He would take her abroad; they would travel from one sunny land to another. He would make her forget all except himself. How he watched her that day! It was not only the love of a man for a woman, it was the tenderness of a brother for a sister, the protecting, sheltering affection of a father for a child. And all his passion was intensified by the thought that the pale stranger might be, even now, on the threshold. What had his love for Lily been when compared to this? Only as a sunbeam to the sun itself. And his love had revealed its presence to him so suddenly—growing silently in the dark as it were, the wilful darkness into which he had thrust it; rooting itself deeply in his heart at the time when he refused to believe that

it existed at all. He determined that he would speak to her that very night, speak quite gently and calmly so as not to excite her—and—if she could not bid him hope! Why! Nay, he would not think of *that*. God would be merciful.

There was something very beautiful and pathetic in Alan's behaviour towards Esther that day. It might be the last day they would ever spend together. If she positively refused him that night he intended to leave the house next morning before breakfast so as not to annoy her by his presence. In spite of fear and uncertainty, the day had a holy serenity, it was as a calm before a storm. To-day he could wait upon her and anticipate her wishes; but to-morrow! Ah, what of to-morrow? Her workstand, her writing-table, bloomed with wonderful flowers, and

for every little act of courtesy there was the excuse ready, "You are going to leave us so soon!" He longed to give her something more than mere flowers; true, some of the blossoms that decked her table that day were worth a guinea each; but nothing was too precious for her whom he revered as the noblest among women.

* * * * *

Oh, women, whom we love, we set you up on pedestals in the temples of our hearts, we insist that you are noble and true, and pure as snow. We long for you, and you become our own. It is not our hands that tear the crowns from your brows, it is not our hands that rend the veil that is between soul and soul, and show us that our hoarded

jewel is lustreless and flawed, and that she whom we exalted as a goddess—she, who was “noble and true and pure”—is a mean, lying creature tricked out with paint and false hair—a whited sepulchre who prates of Platonic affection and elective affinities, and has waded rejoicing through the mental mire of certain modern novels. Rarely in this age of progress does it fall to a man’s lot to meet with such a pearl as our Esther.

On going up-stairs that evening he found the drawing-room empty. He pushed back the folding doors and entered the library. It was overflowed by the soft, rich, sunset lights, and in the midst of the glow sat the pale, whiterobed Esther. She was sitting at the writing table which Alan had so profusely decked with flowers that day, and before her lay a blank sheet of writing-paper. Alan had

been nervous in the morning, but the quiet day had strengthened him, and desperation has a certain tragic calm of its own.

“Are you busy?” asked he quietly, sitting down beside her. Esther glanced up at him, colouring slightly.

“No! not particularly.”

“And you are going in two days?”

“In two days!” echoed Esther.

“Esther,” said Alan, after a pause, “I came to you to-night. I—I—wanted to ask you something. Cannot you guess what it is? Oh, for pity’s sake!” and he looked at her; he, so white and calm, she nervous, flushed, and trembling with downcast eyes.

She said nothing, did not move or look up. One hand was lying on the table, and he ventured to put one of his own upon it.

“Esther—you do not know what you are to me.”

“Oh, please—please don’t,” cried she, drawing away her hand, and covering her face, for her eyes were full of tears.

“I ask nothing from you,” said Alan, “except that you will let me love you.”

“Oh! but that would not be right—and we have been so happy—why have you spoilt it-all?” cried she, half petulantly.

“Esther—Esther. I ask for nothing but leave to love you.”

This was so different from all Esther’s other experiences that she hardly knew what to say. If Alan had asked “did she love him?” an answer would have been quite easy.

“I will wait any time—only—only—don’t send me away.”

In truth, Esther had no wish to send him away. She liked Alan very much indeed "as a friend," and was really perplexed in what way to act.

"May I have a month to think about it?" she asked in a whisper.

Then there was hope for him! He took her hand again and pressed it between his own, and she did not withdraw it. But a *month!*—four weeks of dread and anxiety! Yet he had said that he would wait any time.

"I will do what you wish," he said gently.

Esther was wondering, ought she not to tell him that she loved another so deeply that it was impossible she could ever love him; but then, he had not asked her to love him, and she was so lonely!

Alan was the pleasantest friend she had;

would it not be a pity to say the words that would part them for ever? And so they sat in silence, he blissfully contented that he was not forbidden to hold her hand, Esther dreaming, with a sinking heart, of other things, and forgetting in whose clasp her hand lay.





CHAPTER XI.

THE work to which Esther was told off at the Sisterhood 'was to relieve the Sister in charge of the junior division of the Girls' Orphanage. Esther was a great favourite with the children, and the little, sallow, shrewd faces brightened up at her entrance, and there was much nodding and smiling as well as the ceremonious greeting of "How do you do, Sister?" Miss Brierly, dressed in trailing white, and covered with jet chains, had disappeared for the present, and in her place had come Sister Esther in a fresh, clean, muslin cap, grey-stuff gown, and ebony cross. I think if Alan could have looked in through one of the orphanage

windows and seen Esther thus dressed and surrounded by a cluster of children, telling, eagerly, all the important things that had happened since they last saw her—how some had been promoted, one dismissed to a penitentiary, three died, two then in the infirmary, etc., etc.—he would have been, if possible, more in love with her than ever.

But it was a terrible, dreary life for Esther, though she took herself most severely to task for thinking so. She had had the same work to do before, and how it had pleased her then to do it; but now, all was weariness, dull, stale and unprofitable.

How often she caught herself wishing that the month were over, and then she started and coloured, wondering what the end of the month would bring. It was a great comfort when some one came in to re-

lieve her in the afternoon so as to permit her to go to the church for the five o'clock even-song.

It happened that for the brief space of Esther's month at the sisterhood, a certain strange gentleman made a point of always attending that five o'clock service.

Esther, passing quickly along the aisle to her place near the sanctuary, knew nothing of that black-coated worshipper who watched her so earnestly, yet always hastened out of church before Sister Esther rose from her knees. Alan was haunted at times by bitter fits of remorse, and when, during those services, he glanced to where Esther knelt, so angelically fair and pure, what would he not have given to be able to undo the past? What was he that he should dare to lift sacrilegious eyes to her?



CHAPTER XII.

THE end of the month has come, and Sister Esther having made a distribution of sweeties, and exchanged her pretty cap and veil for an ungainly and uncomfortable feathered-structure, that happened just then to be the fashionable bonnet, took her departure in a cab. There was no one to welcome her but Bustle. Rachael had been with her at the sisterhood, not as maid, of course, but as "lay sister." Cousin Salome had gone off to Brighton in a pet after engaging a set of new servants for the third time that year.

The great excitement of Cousin Salome's life consisted in keeping domestic matters in a state of perpetual ferment.

Esther, accompanied by Bustle, wandered over the great empty house. Poor, dear Bustle, that Holme-bred doggie—the only present which Alan had been permitted to make to his love—how enthusiastic was his reception of his mistress! Was it possible that Bustle knew what the day of the month was? The dear little beast whined and caressed her, and, as Rachael said, “quite cried for joy.” Was he pleading his master’s cause? Esther knew quite well what the day of the month was, but she believed herself to be in as terrible a perplexity as ever. The fact of her going up-stairs, as soon as she had made her tour of the house, and selecting a pretty new dress to wear that evening, had nothing whatever to do with the question of the day of the month! She declared to herself a hundred times that she

was as undecided as ever. She realised that it would be good for Alan if he were to marry her, for she could then influence him on Church matters, and his "views" were, alas ! so very, very far from what they ought to be on such things. That Esther should accept Alan unhesitatingly simply because he was rich and respectable—a good *parti*, in fact—never occurred to her. Her education, you know, had been only second-rate, and she had no mother to counsel her. How very differently would any of Lady Lumley's daughters have behaved had Fate offered Alan Wybergh for their acceptance !

Esther Brierly actually hesitated, and for no better reason than that she "thought she did not love him." Bah ! she might have been a milk-maid. It was a great pity Esther had no friend to reason with her.

She was in a most pitiable condition that day; constantly reminding herself that the month of reprieve was over, and that it only remained to her now to say, "Yes" or "No." From the first word she still shrunk, but she shrunk even more from the other. She had no one to confide in but Bustle, and it must have been for the hundredth time that she had said, "Oh, Bustle dear, what *am* I to do?" when there came a knock and ring at the front door. How her heart beat! She tried to look dignified, but was too nervous to succeed—besides, Bustle was much agitated. His first idea had been, no doubt, that his arch enemy, Cousin Salome, had returned; but as the footsteps ascended the stairs his opinion seemed to vary, and he listened a moment mutely with his ears shrugged up. Suddenly he gave a short

bark of delight, and rushed pell-mell across the room, bounced up against the door, and, finding it closed, sniffed excitedly underneath it. So Alan had, at least, one welcome in Esmond Square. He looked eagerly along the room. Yes, she was there in the distance in the inner room, dressed in soft shadowy-gauze, with a jewelled chain round her white throat, and a jewelled cross on her white breast. She was stooping and slightly turning away ; perhaps she did not know that he was there. Bustle's bark had drowned the servant's announcement. "Down, sir !" said Alan in a low voice, and the good dog crouched down and suppressed his excitement, crept to his master's feet and licked them, and whined.

For a moment Alan stood gazing at Esther (he might be looking at her for the last

time), gazing reverently and piteously. Esther, glancing up, caught that look fixed upon her, and was infinitely touched. Instantly she accused herself of having thought only of her own perplexity, and quite forgetting the anxiety he was undergoing. Kindness always made her queenly, and, her nervousness forgotten, she rose to meet him with the gracious gesture he remembered so well.

“Bustle knows you again,” were her first words, but Alan’s patience had already endured too long, and he could not sacrifice one more moment to trivial preliminaries. Seizing the hand that was extended to greet him, he cried—

“Oh, Esther ! for pity’s sake put me out of my misery. Is it to be ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ ?”

Esther slightly drew back, colouring deeply,

and, almost without her knowledge, the words slipped from her—

“I don’t want to say ‘No.’”

“Which means ‘Yes,’” said Alan.

For a brief second he remained holding her hand and gazing at her with exultation, then he drew her within his arms, and she did not rebuke him.





CHAPTER XIII.

THEN followed upon Alan's part a mental tumult which was heightened rather than soothed by Esther's calm reserve, amounting almost to coldness.

Many would have wearied in a month of such an icy mistress ; but it was Alan's greatest happiness to adore, and, if his star hung high above him, the perpetual effort to reach up to and grasp it served only to intensify his passion. For a long time he never mentioned the question of marriage, but as the autumn began to pass into winter and Esther happened (as do thousands of others) to take cold and had a slight cough, it was

seized on eagerly by Alan as a sign that she ought not to winter in England.

“She must decidedly go abroad.”

“But who with?” asked Cousin Salome tartly, “it is not to be expected that I should go gadding about at my time of life.”

“Cousin Bessie,” suggested Esther, but Alan objected that Robert could not possibly spare Cousin Bessie.

Esther made several excellent suggestions, but to all these Alan had equally excellent objections to raise.

“Then what do you wish me to do?” said she at length.

Cousin Salome was warming her old toes on the fender, and Alan and Esther were sitting together in the embrasure of the window.

Alan took Esther’s left hand in his and kissed the ring finger and whispered—

“You must go with *me*, Esther.”

Esther demurred, but the doctor—perhaps, at Alan’s instigation (they were great friends),—was most urgent that she should be out of England before November began, and so it happened that the wedding was mentioned for the first time and the ceremony concluded all in the space of three weeks.

It all happened so quickly that Esther had scarcely time to think; she was in a dream. There was a great deal of fuss, and battles were fought daily between Cousin Bessie and Cousin Salome, for Cousin Bessie had come to stay with Esther until the wedding was over. There were many matters concerning her *trousseaux* and travelling arrangements that Esther did not care to be troubled about, and which the two old ladies were requested to see to, and, with the arguments about these

matters, Esther became so wearied and harassed that she constantly found herself longing for the quiet time which would be hers when she and Alan had crossed the Channel. Oh, happy land, where no dressmakers would be lying in wait to "try her on," and no petulant old ladies teasing her about the different merits of different trunks, plaids, umbrellas, flasks, sandwich boxes, bags, portmanteaus, etc., etc.

She was not unhappy by any means, quite the reverse, but she was not "in love" with Alan. It was perhaps not likely that she would ever experience again the same passionate affection which she had felt for Robert; but that was now quite vanquished; the joy and the misery of that love were alike passed, the storm was over and a calm new day of her life seemed to be dawning.

The days glided on to the one day, and Esther, in satin and pearls, knelt before the glorious altar at S. Margaret's, where she had so lately knelt in her associate's dress, and as she knelt she resolved that what in her was lacking in love should be made up for by duty.

Ah, white-robed Esther, you did not think of the mockery your thoughts offered to the holy rite—sacrament you deem it—of marriage. You would have considered it a fearful thing to have been married at a registrar's office, and would have preached long and eloquently on the need of the Church's blessing to make marriage holy, but believe me, Esther, the blessing of blessings to marriage is the consecration of the presence of *love*. Not all the altars in the world can make a marriage holy, if *love* is absent.

Poor Alan ! His heart of hearts had gone forth to this calm, pale being. He would have given his right hand that day to have blotted out some of his past life ; his love for Esther was so great and overpowering that he felt utterly unworthy of her. Yet there was a blessing for him from the hands of love—that great Priest of the Most High God—while for her it was decreed that she should expiate hereafter with tears this act of sacrilege.

What good were priest and altar to her ? “How should I bless whom God hath not blessed,” the priest might have answered her.

And how was poor Lily’s daughter faring at this time ? Alan had been down to Evangeline only once between June and November, and⁷¹ then he was so dull and distraught as to

cause Mrs. Brooke to wonder and speculate, until she arrived at the truth. "Mr. Wybergh must be going to be married," said she to herself, and the thought was a bitter one to her.

Evangeline was much hurt by his coldness and long absence. She was nearly seven years old now, and given to brooding over grievances real and imaginary, and the reproof that came from her innocent lips was a very terrible one.

"Ah, Master dear, you have been very kind to me, but then you are not my father, and I must not expect you to love me as though you were."

The words pierced him like a sword thrust. He was beginning to wonder what would be the child's future. He had serious thoughts of consulting Robert about some plan for her

education. He and Robert were excellent friends now, thanks, perhaps, to Esther. Ah, Esther!—yes when they were married he would certainly tell her all.





CHAPTER XIV.

ESTHER has been married a year and a half. Come and look at her in her *boudoir* at the Priory. She is handsomer and more queenly than ever. She is sitting at the open window making a sketch of some particular part of the garden. Alan had suggested that she should do it.

Most dutiful of wives is Mrs. Wybergh who never objects or demurs to the least wish of her husband.

She has most admirably fulfilled that resolution of her marriage morning "to make up for by duty what was lacking in love." How could she tell that her cold obedience chafed

her husband ten thousand times more than any rough refusal would have done? They never quarrelled. Was it because they did not dare? She gave up her will to Alan's in everything. When they returned from their tour and went home to the Priory, Esther would have liked to begin a regular course of school teaching and visiting in the village; to tell the truth she had been looking forward to it, but in this Alan's love thwarted her. If it was a chilly day he followed her with a shawl, if it was sunny he walked with her and held up an umbrella, if she evaded him and went alone he would be certain to look in just at the most important part of the lesson and scold the master for not having the room better ventilated and entreat her to come away at once.

Of course he would not hear of her enter-

ing any house where there was sickness, and the Sunday school was entirely out of the question, for Alan liked music on Sunday afternoon. The most that Esther found herself able to accomplish without opposition was the visiting occasionally of a dozen old people, pensioners of Alan's, who almost lived out of the Priory kitchen, and Esther fancied they scarcely welcomed her unless she took a handsome present with her. Esther, who all her life had been a most independent creature, was fretted and worried by these little restrictions and interferences, although she knew them to be prompted by love.

Instead of being chains of roses they were fetters. She felt haunted and dogged, and looked back regretfully on those old independent days in London when, accompanied only

by Rachael, she had gone when and where she chose. She did not care for society, unless indeed it was either intellectual or ecclesiastical, having been brought up in a school that looked with contempt upon anything which appeared to have a tendency to worldliness. Of intellectual society there was an utter blank in the neighbourhood of the Priory, and the ecclesiastical element was represented by certain uninteresting Low Churchmen of the "holy vegetable" type.

Alan's position in the county required that he should be entertained, and in turn entertain a number of important squires and squiresses, and at these parties Esther appeared in her bridal robes, and was considered "very distinguished looking." As Alan glanced down his table and his eyes fell upon the snow-queen opposite him with his

mother's diamonds in her hair, I wonder if he ever remembered the dream he had had so many years before of another black-haired bride? He had pictured her to himself with those very diamond stars glimmering in her hair, yet not in a queenly coronet, but looping back clusters of curls. He had said to himself that on either side of the table would be silly chattering men and women, but they would be powerless to divide him from his bride.

Now and again their eyes would meet for a brief second. Ah! Esther's eyes never sought his. He glanced at her continually, but she was utterly unconscious of it. She was an excellent hostess—courteous to the most insignificant of her guests, devoting herself to no one especially, but endeavouring, and usually very successfully, to promote

general conversation. She would suit her own conversation to any capacity from that of a bishop to the mayor of a market town.

Alan was to be pitied. He loved Esther most passionately, and it was hard to spend so much affection on a being who never brightened up at his approach, never begged him to hurry home, never reproached him for being late, and whose only remark, when told that he was going to London for a fortnight, was that the lock of his portmanteau wanted repairing.

Was there any wonder that Alan had never summoned up courage to tell Esther about Evangeline? The good God had sent no child to Esther's hearth, how could he tell her of this child in Devonshire?

His heart managed to live on the bare pittance of affection which she gave him, and

could not run the risk of losing it, meagre though it was. He ought to have told her of Evangeline as soon as they were married, if he intended to tell her at all. She was so truthful herself, how she would scorn him if she knew all? So he contented himself with stealing a day or two, when supposed to be in London on business, for a hurried visit to Evangeline.

It was during one of these visits that Esther had begun the sketch of the gardens. Alan had asked for it ; he was to be away a fortnight, and she would be able to finish it before his return. Alan, she knew, had gone in the first instance to visit Miss Crewe. Before returning from their wedding tour Alan had arranged by letter that Aunt Crewe should remove her seat of government from Holme Priory to Esmond Square. The arrange-

ment was rather agreeable to Aunt Charlotte than otherwise. London, as she justly observed, was in matters ecclesiastical the great scene of action, and she promptly assumed a position of importance in evangelical circles.

Cousin Salome did not live many weeks after Miss Crewe's arrival, and it was generally reported that her life was shortened by the indefatigable efforts made to convert her by Miss Crewe's clerical followers.

Cousin Bessie had come to stay with Esther during Alan's absence, and together they sat that spring day making a leisurely attempt at industry—the one knitting, the other lightly sketching in her picture. Esther had nearly finished the outline when she rose and went to the window and leaned out of it for a moment. She had been working quite an

hour, and imagined she was tired and would need a little rest before doing anything more. She had her pencil in her hand as she leaned dreamily out among the yellow jessamine which Alan had himself trained round her window, and the pencil slipped from her hand and fell into the garden below.

“How provoking,” said Esther, gazing after it. “It was my only H. B.”

“Send some one to pick it up,” suggested Cousin Bessie.

“Oh, they would never find it, and only crush the flowers.”

“Well, my dear, there is no hurry about your sketch to-day, is there? We are going out for a drive in an hour, and could perhaps go as far as Severston.”

“I could have done so much in an hour,” said Esther.

Now that the loss of the pencil made the proceeding with the sketch a matter of difficulty, she became suddenly anxious to do it, and remembered that Alan might possibly have left his case out. His room was close at hand, she would go there and see if she could not find a pencil that would do. Although the little den that was sacred to her husband was only a few yards from the room where she spent nearly half her days, she was a comparative stranger in it. He often came to Esther, but she never sought him.

Alan would sit there for hours writing or reading, but Esther, with a consideration which argued little love, took care "not to interrupt him."

There is something touching in the chill order, the desolate neatness of a room, the

owner of which is absent. We cannot avoid contrasting the death-like rigidity of the chamber and its contents, as we then see them, with the wholesome fuss and litter which prevails at other times.

Perhaps some thought of this kind struck Esther, for as she crossed to the writing table she shivered. Yes, his pencils were there, and she sat down before the table, and opening the blotting case looked in it for a piece of paper to try them on. She found a half sheet, tried them, decided which she would take, and was just going to rise from the chair when she noticed that the paper she had been scribbling on was written upon on the other side. She turned it over, and the first glance showed her that it was an unfinished letter. It was in Alan's writing, only a few lines :—

“MY DARLING ELLA,—

“I am coming up to town this week, and will, if possible, run down to you for a few days. I think you may expect me on Thursday evening. I do long to see my darling again.”

Here was a blot, perhaps the reason that the letter had never been finished.

How long Esther sat with this paper in her hand reading those few lines mechanically over and over, until they seemed burnt into her brain, she never knew. Her dream was broken by Cousin Bessie opening the door, and saying—

“The carriage has come round, Esther; are you not coming?”

Esther started and turned to the window, crushing the paper in her hand, and replied

that her head ached, and she would rather not go out at all.

“ Ah, I thought you had been stooping too long over your drawing. Well, let me send the carriage away. I do not at all care to go out.”

“ Oh, no,” said Esther, hastily, “ I shall most likely lie down. Bates would be annoyed at having brought the carriage out for nothing. I would rather be alone.”

Cousin Bessie had her feelings, and when her dear Esther said that she wished to be alone, she turned abruptly and left the room without another word; perhaps if she had seen the white scared face, which had all the time been studiously turned away from her, she would have thought little of the seeming rudeness. When she was alone again, Esther looked down at the crumpled paper in her

hand. What must she do with it? Burn it? Smooth it out and replace it? Lock it up in her desk, and challenge him with—with what? What could the letter mean but one thing! During the short interval which had elapsed between her betrothal and her marriage a kind friend had found it her duty to hint to Esther—hint broadly and plainly—the kind of life that Alan had led at one time. To which Esther had replied that she “wedded the present, not the past,” and, turning her back then and there upon her “friend,” had never spoken to her since. The scene had almost passed from her memory, and in her married life there had been nothing to recall it until now. Alan had been only too affectionate a husband, and Esther sighed, remembering how very little he had ever received in return. Was it

possible, she asked herself, that he was getting wearied of giving all and receiving nothing? And for the first time it occurred to her that in the few days previous to that on which he left home he had been restless and unsettled, and, she fancied now, less with her than usual. She had scarcely given it a thought at the time, but now, when she looked back, she remembered that he had spent a great deal of time alone in his own room lately. When they returned from their wedding tour he had taken her to London for a few days, but she had soon wearied of it, and when Alan had expressed a wish to go up to town a few months later, and had asked her to go too, she had refused, and he had gone alone. This time he had not asked her to go with him.



CHAPTER XV.

Yes, Alan had been down to Evangeline. He had gone, intending only to stay two nights, but he could not resist the child's pleading look as she begged him to remain over Sunday.

"You have not been a Sunday with me for a whole year," said she, with a sob.

Together father and child knelt in the old church, and together wandered in the evening down the beautiful Devonshire lanes; and then returning to the white cottage, Alan sat down to Evangeline's dear piano—it had been her father's gift to her mother—and played while the child sang.

When the parting came next morning, Evangeline wept bitterly, and clung to Alan as she had never done before.

“Something must really be done about her,” he said to himself a hundred times that day, and he resolved, as he had often resolved before, to arrange with Robert about sending her to school where she would have the companionship of children of her own age.

He felt very dull and unhappy as the train bore him on his way to Severston. He had telegraphed from King’s Cross that he would reach the Priory about nine. “Would his wife be in the drawing-room?” he wondered and sighed. The last time he had returned from London after a fortnight’s absence she had been away at a Church Union Meeting, and his welcome home had been contained in

a pretty little note which Rachael delivered to him on the threshold, which stated that Esther had "ordered everything for his comfort" (a meat tea), "and hoped not to be late home." He was leaving a warm child-heart overflowing with love behind him, and returning "home" to his ice queen.

"Oh, Esther! Esther!" he moaned.
"Am I never to win your love?"

When he reached Severston he was surprised to see his man waiting on the platform; he had given no orders for the carriage to meet him, intending to take a cab from the station. It was an hour's drive from Severston to Holme.

"Mrs. Wybergh has been in Severston shopping to-day, sir, and remained until now in case of your returning by this train," explained the man.

Alan made his way through the bustle to the enclosure where the carriages waited, and eagerly sought his own. It was nearly dusk, but he could see the face he loved better than all the world gazing towards him—his wife, with an expression on her face that was new to him—an anxious questioning look that he had never seen before. What did it mean?

“Are you well?” was his first question, as he grasped her hand.

“Yes. Why? And you?”

“Oh, I am well of course. And you really delayed your return until now, so that you might know if I were coming? Tell me you did, Esther?”

“Why should I not?”

“Say that you did. I should like to think that you did.”

“I did.”

The lamps had just been lighted, and the bold light streamed in upon Esther's beautiful face, and he saw the colour rush for a second over her cheek. Was his prayer going to be answered at last, he asked himself?

We who know Esther Wybergh's character better perhaps than her husband did, will not wonder if we find that she began first to value her treasure when she feared it was slipping from her grasp.

Should he tell her now about Evangeline? Dare he risk the shipwreck of his hopes?

When Esther found that paper in Alan's writing case her first thought had been to go away somewhere with Cousin Bessie, and leave the paper enclosed in a note to Alan, telling him not to come to her unless he were able to explain what the paper meant. But the morning's post brought her such a tender,

affectionate letter from her husband that her heart refused to doubt him. Might not that paper be years old, and have got into the case by accident? What had she to do with those past years? So she alternated between hope and fear. Had he indeed come again under some evil influence, the relic of his old wild days; could she count herself sinless? He had given her his whole heart once, but what had she done to keep it? She remembered how little interest she had taken in his pursuits, how little she had ever put herself out of the way to amuse him; nay how wearied of his constant companionship she had allowed herself to be. In the self-condemnation which followed these thoughts her first dramatic idea was dismissed, and almost unconsciously the resolution was formed, that, cost what it might, she would win back and

keep to herself the whole of her husband's heart. She locked that paper away in her desk—perhaps *some* day she might ask him about it.





CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN Esther returned one morning in the following autumn from a drive, Rachael met her on the threshold and gave her a letter. It was from Alan—

“MY DARLING WIFE—

“News that I have just received obliges me to set off for town *at once*. You must be very certain, my dearest, that nothing but the most urgent necessity would make me go away without saying good-bye to you. Will write to-night, if possible, and explain all.

“Yours,

“A. W.”

Alan gone! and gone to London! Instantly the old fears returned which had been aroused by the sight of that unfinished letter.

“A messenger rode over from Severston,” explained Rachael, “and brought a telegram. Evans took it up to master, and was ordered to go at once and pack his portmanteau.”

“And Evans went away with him?” said Esther, a ray of hope stealing upon her.

“No, ma’am. Evans said master said that it was not necessary.”

Esther, holding Alan’s brief note in her hand, went slowly up the stairs and into her *boudoir*. All the things remained as they had left them two hours before—on the table in the window was a wilderness of drawing materials, and in front of the little sketch was the chair on which she had sat, and beside it that of Alan. How these chairs

seemed to mock her, standing thus empty ! And Alan and Esther had planned to dine early and take a sunset walk in the woods that evening. A sudden sense of desolation came over Esther. How differently she felt now to what she had done that last time when he had gone away from her. Then she had experienced an almost pleasant sensation of freedom, and felt glad to have a few days in which to do just as she chose ; but now she could think of nothing except that Alan had gone and she knew not whither.

With reverent fingers she put away the things they had been using together. They had been reading Shelley, and it lay open and she put in some rose leaves to mark the place. She tried not to think where Alan might have gone. It was impossible, she said to herself a hundred times, that one who

loved her so very much could have room in his heart for another. She would not allow herself to think it. Yet, even as she said this, she recalled the little fancied slights which had once or twice offended her dignity; the absent, dreamy moods that Alan occasionally gave way to, and other trifles which, before the discovery of that paper, she had never cared to notice.

There was no letter the next morning. Well, she told herself that Alan could scarcely have reached London in time to write, but when the second morning came and then the third, and brought no letter either, Esther knew not what to think. She was alarmed as well as perplexed. At first the idea of writing to Robert crossed her mind, but she checked it by the wretched thought that Alan might have gone to some

place where he would scarcely like Robert to find him. And how could she endure the mortification of owning that her husband had gone away from her, and she did not know whither! She wrote no letters, and refused herself to all visitors. Happily it was the custom of the house to bring the letter-bag to her to be unlocked, and so the servants were not able to remark that "master had never written home."

In her misery and uncertainty that day an idea struck her. She would try and find the telegram. Alan had received it in his own room; there was no fire in which to burn it; ten to one he had thrown it, according to habit, into the waste-paper basket.

She felt like a guilty thing as she knelt before the heaped-up basket, telling herself that she was prying into what her husband

had studiously concealed from her. There was something so very mean and contrary to her nature in the act, that her pride must have been thoroughly crushed before the idea of doing it even entered her head. The telegram was where she expected it would be, but torn into fifty atoms. She laid the fragments of pinky paper in a heap and searched through and through the basket to be sure she had got every scrap before she commenced her work of piecing them. She heard a footstep in the passage, and rose hastily and locked the door, and then, kneeling down before the little pink heap, which contained perhaps so much misery for her within it, set herself to arrange the fragments with trembling fingers. It was sooner done than she had expected—

“Mrs. Brooke, Exridge, Darton, to A.

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L

Wybergh, Severston. Ella is very ill. She entreats you to come to her at once."

Esther had got her wish. She knew now where her husband was. But who was this Ella who had power to summon Alan to her so suddenly? She pictured to herself a bold, flaunting creature obliged to feign illness as a means of bringing back to her her former lover. No doubt that was it, said she bitterly.

The third day came and went, and yet there was no letter, and dreadful and most improbable fears oppressed Esther. She recalled cases she had read of in newspapers and novels—what might not a jealous woman do out of revenge? Her anxiety was becoming unbearable and maddening, and when the night of that day came on which she had found the telegram, she resolved that, should

the next morning bring no letter, she would go up to London and tell Robert all.

The morning brought no letter, and Esther began desperately to arrange about her journey. She had a great horror of scandal, and to save her husband's honour, Esther, for the first time in her life, stooped deliberately to tell a lie. She said she had to go up to town to join Mr. Wybergh at Mr. Brierly's.

Rachael entreated to be allowed to go with her; she was certain her mistress was ill, but Esther reminded her that there was no room for her at the Parsonage, but bade her be in readiness to come the moment she was sent for.

At seven o'clock that evening Esther was in a London cab and on her way to S. Lucien's. She did not trouble now to think if she was doing wisely or not; she was

pursued by a thousand wild fears, and her great desire was to see her husband again and know that he was well and safe—then she would defy this Ella and the whole world.

These days of loneliness and anxiety had been terrible to her. As she went towards S. Lucien's she forgot entirely that she was going to one whom she had once loved so deeply. Robert was to her now just the only friend in the whole world to whom she could, in this present trouble, turn for help. She had no plans further than this, that she would tell him all, and give him full leave to act accordingly as he should think best. She had calculated that she would reach S. Lucien's just in time to catch Robert before he went to Evensong. It struck seven as she passed the church, and looking out of the cab window she noticed that they were lighting

it up for service. One after another the bright lights in the windows shone forth. Esther, wearied and troubled though she was, noticed how vividly the colours gleamed out in the dusky street.

Then the cab stopped at the Parsonage, and the cabman, without waiting, jumped down and rang the bell. It seemed an age before any one answered, and then a girl, who was no doubt the present experiment, appeared.

“ I suppose your master is at home ? ” said Esther, preparing to alight.

“ Master has gone away for three days, and his address is with Mr. Benson, the senior curate, No. 11, Paradise Lane ; and Miss Smith is at Brighton for a fortnight, 17, Belle Vue Terrace,” replied the girl glibly, peeping warily round the half-opened door.

Utterly wearied and nervous, Esther felt on the point of breaking down altogether. With difficulty she steadied her voice sufficiently to ask if the girl thought her master had gone far.

At first she could not undertake to say, but then, suddenly brightening, remembered having heard him say to Mr. Benson that it would be a good three hours' journey.

Poor Esther; whatever was she to do? For some seconds she sat staring blankly out of the cab window, and then the cabman enquiring for further orders, she paid him in silence, and, taking her bag in her hand, got out and walked slowly back to the church. As she entered it the congregation were reciting the Creed, reciting it as with one voice in that loud, emphatic way which was customary at S. Lucien's. Insensibly Esther felt in-

vigorated, and that terrible feeling of desolation passed away. She kept down her veil and sat away from the congregation, many of whom she had once been very intimate with. But she no longer felt alone.

But when the service was ended and the congregation departed one by one, she was obliged to remind herself that she had not decided where to spend the night. She could not go to Esmond Square; she must go to an inn, and it would be wiser that it should not be one in a neighbourhood where she was known. She remembered having once gone on a begging expedition with Cousin Robert to a quiet old-fashioned inn in King James' Street. She had never been there before or since; she knew the people were very respectable and liberal, and always ready to give when asked, but never came to church,

and would not be likely to recognise her. She decided that she would stay the night there; but before leaving the church she could not resist walking up the aisle to gaze again upon the gleaming altar. Standing before the bronze gate of the sanctuary she suddenly remembered that last time when she had been there. It was at that Mission time when she first met Alan. How she had then loved Robert; but now that love was but as a withered flower, and crushing it and thrusting it aside was this new hungry love which was such an exquisite pain that she scarcely knew whether the possession of it were a joy or a grief. And she had slighted it so long, and now it was being withdrawn from her, and the sense of desolation came back upon her so strongly and overpoweringly that, hardly knowing what she did, she sank on her knees

under the shelter of the beautiful gate, and, covering her face with her hands, cried in her heart: "Oh, my God, give me back my husband!" Then rising, she turned and went out quickly into the dark street.

She walked on to the end of that street and entered the vast dismal square, and hurried along under the shadow of the gloomy houses, once noblemen's mansions, now warehouses and offices, dark and silent for the night, and unoccupied except by the watchman and his dog, or, perhaps, the shades of former tenants. I wonder did any stately ghosts look down from those uncurtained windows on that lonely, unhappy wife as she passed by!

I can imagine some shadowy being, once a queen of Society, in ruff and lace, pointing disdainfully a pallid finger, and

asking, "What are *her* griefs to what mine were? Has she had to entertain her lord's mistress? Has she had to hear of family jewels on the necks of baseborn children? and has she been compelled to wear through all a courtly smile?" How the pale lips would sneer at the petty troubles of the country squire's wife.

Of all this Esther recked nothing, but went on swiftly, and at length, passing down another street, stopped before the inn she sought, The King's Head. She recognised the genial hostess, but no one recognised her.

"We have only one bedroom at liberty," said the good woman, "and that is on the third floor."

But Esther had sank on a chair in the lobby utterly prostrated. She could not go

further. All she wanted was food and rest. Any room would do.

Next morning she made up her mind what to do. She could not write to Robert; she could easily have told him all, but—she could not write it.

No! She would telegraph to Rachael to know if there were any letters, and bid her send them by the next train. And then? That she would decide after she had received the letters.

She went down to the station and telegraphed, bidding Rachael reply there.

Two hours later she got an answer—

“There are no letters at all this morning.”

In the interval while she had been waiting for the reply to the telegram, she had examined the time-table.

There was no such place as Exridge down on it ; but there was a Darton, in Devonshire. Mrs. Brooke had dated her telegram from Exridge, Darton, and as it was the only Darton in the Bradshaw, it must be the one.

Rachael's reply did not surprise Esther ; she was becoming accustomed to the daily disappointment. This was the sixth day ; by to-morrow Alan would have been away a week. In other weeks of absence she had received three or four letters from him—never less than three.

As she was standing thinking, with the telegram in her hand, a country-woman pushed past her and asked a porter in a loud voice when the Salisbury train would leave.

“Almost due,” was the reply, and the woman hurried away to a booking office.

Now, Salisbury was one of the principal towns on the way to Darton, and the blood rushed to Esther's face as she made a sudden resolution, and followed the woman into the office.

"Can I book through to Darton?" she asked the clerk.

"Yes; what class?"

She thought a moment, and then said "Third."

In a third-class she would be less likely to meet with people she knew; and almost directly she found herself in a crowded railway carriage, and hurrying—whither?

Leaning back in her corner, she turned as much away as possible from her rough companions.

There was cursing and disputing going on among the men, and the women chattered

and scolded, and the children cried; but Esther, leaning her hot forehead on her hand, knew nothing of it all.

It was only a part of an evil dream, and she no more heeded the noises within than she heeded the beauty without. Through autumn-tinted forests they passed, and then Esther's eyes wandered dreamily from winding, sunlit river to heathery moor, and green overshadowing hills.

After a while, in the distance rose the mighty spire of Salisbury, and later on, skirting Exeter, they caught a glimpse of the Cathedral towers rising dark and majestic above the city roofs, while in the further distance, stretched a long, silvery line of sea.

But of all this, Esther, staring dull-eyed from the window, saw nothing.

What were the beauties of nature or art to her then? All the powers of her soul were absorbed in the carrying out of one idea. She had sacrificed her pride, and almost her honour. There was no feeling of anger in her heart. She was going as a suppliant, haunted by unceasing self-reproach. She told herself perpetually that all this would never have happened had she been a more affectionate wife at the first; moreover, had anything further been needed to soften her, there was the constantly recurring dread of some calamity having befallen Alan.

Her journey was a weary one. She had come by a slow train, and twice had to wait a tedious half-hour at junctions; so it happened that it was six o'clock before they entered the Darton station.

A heavy fog was hanging over the town,

and the station lamps were burning dimly. Esther pulled her veil over her face and looked out. It was a small dark station, and two porters were hurrying about. One came and unlocked her carriage and then went to a first-class one, and Esther saw a portly old gentleman alight. He and she were the only passengers for Darton that evening.

Esther got out quietly and walked across the station out of the dim gaslight into a dark corner, intending to wait there until the train had passed on.

The old gentleman had gone to the van and was apparently making a fuss about some luggage.

Esther, waiting in the dark corner, her heart sinking more than ever, now that the end of her journey seemed at hand, heard a sudden noise of wheels drawing quickly near,

then stopping ; and in another second a door close behind her opened, and some one came hurriedly through, let the door bang behind him, and, brushing against her as he passed, ran up to the old gentleman before the luggage van.

The new-comer turned round, and the flickering light fell on his face. It was her husband ! And so her fears for his safety were groundless.

At first she was greatly relieved and most thankful that none of the terrible accidents she had imagined had befallen him—and then, to speak the truth, she became angry, and owned to herself that it would have been better if there had been some slight ailment or accident which would have both explained and excused his conduct. He was apparently in perfect health, though much

agitated, and Esther, trembling in every limb with the throbbing of her heart, gazed at him through her veil. She saw him turn and speak sharply to the porter, and then lay his hand impatiently on the old gentleman's arm and draw him away.

They passed close to her, but were too much engrossed in other matters to notice the lonely woman who shrunk aside into the darkness. They went through the noisy, swinging door, and in another moment there was the sound of wheels and a horse's tread.

As it died away in the distance Esther went up to a porter and asked if he could procure her a conveyance to Exridge.

"Exridge! Do you want to go to-night?"

"I want to go immediately."

The porter looked doubtful, and muttered something about the Darton cabs having all gone off to the Hellerton Gala. He wished she had mentioned it sooner, as those gentlemen who had just driven off might have given her a seat in their trap.

“They were going to Exridge?”

The porter nodded; and then, after a pause, recollected that a friend of his had a gig which he might be induced to get out for a consideration.”

“Anything—only be quick,” cried Esther, impatiently.

“It might be round in twenty minutes,” said he, leisurely consulting a huge silver watch. “Would ten shillings be too much? He would either have to return to-night or put up at the inn.”

“Fifteen if he is here in ten minutes,” replied she.

And the man, rousing himself, disappeared like a shot.

In ten minutes he returned, saying it was quite ready, and Esther, going through the swinging door, found a clumsily-built dog-cart waiting for her, with a boy of fourteen as driver.

Esther had a faint hope of being able to hear something about Exridge and its inhabitants before getting there; but the solemn boy who drove her could tell her nothing.

He knew the road there, but he had never been in. He belonged to Hellerton, and he knew nothing about the party that went off in the other gig. In fact he knew nothing about anything, but brightened up at a hint

about half-a-crown for the driver, and consented to whip up and hurry on the ponderous horse that was dragging them.

Why Esther was in a hurry she scarcely knew ; she might reach the end all too soon. Now that she knew Alan was alive and well she wished she were at home again. Would it not have been better if she had stayed at an inn at Darton, she wondered, and returned to Severston as soon as possible next day?

She had reminded herself constantly during her journey that the first object of it was to know about Alan's safety. Well ! that fear was set at rest ; what was the object of her journey now ? To dog her husband's steps and find where, and with whom, he was hiding from her ?

Oh, how despicable her conduct seemed—but it was too late to turn back now ; she must

find a night's lodging at Exridge, and then, very early in the morning, get back to the Darton station and go home.

Home! The Priory could never again be home to her.

Esther stopped the boy at the outskirts of the village and paying him, bade him wait awhile and see whether she returned or not. At a little distance a brightly-lighted house shone out, which no doubt was an inn, and she went towards it.

It must have been raining heavily, for the pathway seemed a mass of mud, and it was with difficulty she could prevent herself slipping, and her petticoats got wet and clung miserably about her. There were no lights except such as gleamed in the cottage windows. Most of them were curtained, but here and there an updrawn blind disclosed

a little family group clustering round the hearth, or seated at supper; and Esther, turning from the dark lonely street to those bright glimpses of home life, felt doubly desolate.

Once she paused for a moment before one of these uncurtained windows, and leaned to rest on the little garden gate. Looking up, she saw a picture which moved her strangely. Before the fire, lighted up by its ruddy glow, sat a young mother with a babe on her knee. The child was almost naked and stretched out its plump limbs, delighted to be free, and reached its pinky hands towards the blaze, while the mother bent over it smiling. Some one entered—no doubt the husband and father. He came and laid a big brown hand on the girl's shoulder, and she turned and looked up at him. There was a sudden

blaze upon the hearth, and Esther saw vividly for a second the two faces, lighted up with something more than love—something which denoted a pure, unquestioning union of soul as well as heart—a union of which Esther had not dared even to dream. In that one glance which passed between that husband and wife there was such quiet, restful love, such perfect trust, that Esther, bowing her head, passed on, and the remembrance of the babe on the mother's knee pierced her like a sword.

She looked at no more cottage windows, but went on quickly to the inn.

When she stood at length in the open doorway, it occurred to her, for the first time, that there might be something odd and unusual in a lady coming alone at such an hour. She did not dare venture further

than the threshold, but rang the bell and waited.

There was a great deal of noise in the bar, loud talking and jingling of glasses, and no one seemed to heed the bell. So after waiting what seemed to her a long time, Esther rang again.

"There! I told you there was some one," said a cross voice, and a dirty jaded servant came forward and asked what was wanted.

"I want some rooms, if you have any at liberty," replied Esther, in a low voice.

"I'll fetch missis. Won't you walk in?"

"No thank you, I prefer waiting here."

Giving her a somewhat suspicious glance, the girl went into the bar, and presently returned with the innkeeper's wife. Tired Esther was leaning against the doorpost for support, and the first thing which the

hostess's eye fell upon was the mud-stained skirt, and she was about to tell the stranger coldly that lodgings proper for such as her could be had at the public a little further on when she caught sight of the rings which sparkled on the lady's ungloved hand, and adopting a very different tone and manner to that which a moment before she had intended using, begged to know what the lady wanted.

"I want a bed-room for the night, and a sitting-room, if you have one," replied Esther.

The hostess considered for a moment. "We have only one bed-room that is really at liberty, and it is very small, but perhaps you would walk up and see it?" Esther complied in silence, and followed Mrs. Tomkins up the narrow staircase. She did not think Alan would be likely to recognise her, even were they to meet. She was entirely in black

and thickly veiled. Up and up they went, until they came to a little attic room. It was very small and close, but perfectly clean, and Esther said it would do quite well, and sitting down in a chair she put back her veil.

“It will do quite well for one night,” said she, endeavouring to speak in an indifferent tone. “I have been unfortunate to-day. The train I came by was slow, and all the cabs being engaged, I had to get a dog-cart from a porter, and that came very slowly, so I did not get here until dark. The neighbourhood, I believe, is very pretty?”

The hostess, who had been scrutinising her closely, had come to the conclusion, taking one thing with another, that she was a “real lady.”

“Oh, yes, miss, very pretty, very.” And then, hesitating a little, she added, “If it

should happen that you have any friends coming to meet you, I dare say I could get you an extra room to-morrow."

To which Esther replied quietly that she expected no one coming to her; indeed was herself on the way to some friends, adding, "I had no idea your house would be so full."

"Yes, we generally have a good deal of company after the shooting begins. If you had been ten minutes earlier I might have given you a better room, but it was taken by a gentleman for another gentleman.

"For the shooting?" asked Esther, stooping down to do something to her gown.

"Oh, no! he is a London doctor, and come down to see a sick person in the village."

Esther, still stooping, asked what the complaint was.

"Well, by all accounts, I should say it was

a decline. And such a sweet pretty child, too ! But the will of the Lord be done !” said the innkeeper’s wife, with a pious air.

“ A *child*, did you say ?” asked Esther, in a low, trembling voice.

“ Yes, quite a child—eight years old, perhaps—a little girl. It’s not a common complaint for a child, is it ?”

“ And has she a mother ?” asked Esther, still engrossed with her dress.

“ Ah ! there it is ! that is what I have said all along. A *mother* would have noticed things before they got so bad, but the old woman she lives with—Granny, though she calls her—is getting past work, and not fit to take care of the child.”

“ And she has no one else belonging to her ?”

“ Oh, yes, there is her guardian, as they call him. He comes down sometimes, and very

fond he is of her, and she of him. He got married awhile ago, I have heard, and the child has never been herself since. It's my belief she frets about his being away from her so much. Oh, I remember when he used to be down for weeks at a time, and now it is barely a day and a-half in a quarter, and I ought to know, for he generally stays here at nights. He is a very pleasant gentleman, is Mr. Alan. But you will be wanting some supper, miss, after your journey. Have you come far?"

"From London. I should like a cup of tea; might I have it here?"

"Certainly, if you fancy to, though there is Mr. Alan's sitting-room, which you may use and welcome, for he won't be back to-night—not, at any rate, until last thing. He is nearly crazed about the child."

“No ! no !” said Esther, with a shudder, and turning away as she spoke.

“It is really a beautiful room,” persisted the landlady. His bedroom is exactly below this, and the sitting-room is below that, facing the street, and a beautiful view, though not of course so fine as this, this being higher up.”

“I should prefer staying here, and if you could get me some tea soon I should be so much obliged.”

Murmuring forth regrets that she would not consent to use the other lodger's room, the landlady retired, and Esther was left alone in the cheerless room, dimly lighted by one slender, flickering candle, which made wierdlike, creeping shadows on the white curtains, and staring-patterned wall paper.

Esther paced the floor impatiently. How long the servant was in bringing up the tea !

She almost thought she would not wait for it, and then she remembered that she was cold and wet, and must not run the risk of being ill *there*. When she entered the inn she intended to stay there quietly for the night, and return early next morning to Severston; but now—now—she must see this child, she *must* see it—this child that was not hers, and that her husband loved so much.

There was the sound of a footstep on the creaking stairs, and presently the servant entered breathless and panting, with a huge tray, filled according to the landlady's private views as to what a tea ought to be. Esther had been forming her plans while the tea was being prepared, and when the panting girl landed the tray upon the floor, and was busy making room for it on the dressing table, Esther said—

“Your mistress spoke of a London doctor being here—is this an unhealthy village?”

“Well ! middling so,” said the girl, languidly. “There is a deal of decline.”

“Perhaps some parts of it are more unhealthy than others ?”

“I am sure I can’t say.”

“Perhaps it is very damp where this sick person lives ?”

“Which sick person ? Ella Brooke ?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I daresay it is damp there. You see the white cottage is all among trees, and that may make it damp.”

“I did not notice many trees as I came here.”

“Not if you came from Darton you would not ; they are at the low side of the village.”

“And which way is that?”

“Down the street,” said the girl, indicating the direction by a jerk of the head. “You go *up* the street to Darton and *down* the street to Hellerton. Will you please to want anything more?”

“No thank you, but you need not come back to fetch the tray, for I think I will just take a cup of tea now, and then have a little walk and see what the village looks like by moonlight. I should like to see that low part where the trees are, and I will have something more when I come in. If I leave early in the morning this will be my only opportunity for seeing the village.”

“You are not going down into the low side of the village to-night, miss, and by yourself?” asked the girl, seriously.

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing, you would have to pass the churchyard gate.”

“What of that?”

“Well it’s what I would not do alone on a moonlight night for a good deal.”

Esther gave a little hysterical laugh. What were all the *dead* people of Exridge to her?

“Oh, it’s easy to laugh,” said the girl somewhat affronted, “but if you had heard of the things I have heard of!”

“I am not afraid of any ghosts,” said Esther as the girl left her, and hurriedly fastening her bonnet and cloak, and pulling down her veil, she left the room and went downstairs. When she came to the first-floor landing the door of the room that the hostess had mentioned as being Alan’s sitting-room, was standing wide open. The room was empty, and she went stealthily in and

looked round. It was primly tidy and clean, and bore no signs of having been occupied lately. There was nothing to show that it had an owner at all except a little heap of books on one side-table beside the door. The two uppermost were children's story books, new and gaily bound, and underneath them was a shilling Keats, out of which he had often read to her that summer in the garden. On the fly-leaf was written E. and A. W. Esther opened the book in the centre and tore out a leaf, and then replacing the books as she had found them, left the room. Why she had torn out that leaf she scarcely knew, but as she went down-stairs she folded it carefully and put it away in her purse. Then quickly crossing the glaring, paraffin-lighted lobby she went out into the quiet night. The white full moon had risen and was sail-

ing slowly among the fleecy clouds like the pallid ghost of a dead sun, and, shining with its cold light, everything seemed to wear the aspect of death. How oppressive was the stillness of the empty street.

Esther quickened her steps and wondered if she were going to be nervous. She went on to the end of the village street and then found herself upon the green, and beyond that the trees which she was seeking stood out blackly against the opal sky. The house must surely be near at hand. She stood a moment when she came upon the green and re-called what the servant had said about the house where the sick child lived. It stood among trees at the low part of the village, and, to reach it she would have to pass the churchyard. She could see nothing of the church, but, perhaps, it was among those

trees. How black they looked, waving before her like the feathers on a hearse, as she crossed the smooth grass all wet and slippery with the night dews. She passed the old school house—it was all in darkness that night, for Master Falconer was watching beside the sick child's couch—and saw, suddenly, shining through the trees, the white walls of the old church. So suddenly she came upon it, and so white and ghost-like it looked with the moonlight gleaming on it, that she shuddered. She was standing in the shadow of the dark, empty school house; before her lay a few yards of grass, a narrow road, a hedge, beyond which rose the trees with the spectre-like church in their midst. Striving to repel the sensation of fear which would come over her from time to time, she crossed the road and went

up to the hedge to discover if the churchyard lay behind it. Yes, there were the shadowy graves. The headstones looked so ghastly, and cast such deep, black shadows that she did not wonder at the servant's terror of a moonlight visit to the spot. But Esther did not fear the dead—she had not come out that night for their sake, and she looked in vain for any sign of a house or cottage in the neighbourhood of the church. Perhaps the house she was seeking lay behind the church? She went along beside the hedge until it parted and showed her a long, narrow lane, and at the corner of it was the churchyard gate. She leaned upon it a second, and her eyes wandering from the church to the trees behind and about it, she fancied she caught a glimpse of lights sparkling through them. The trees swayed

to and fro in the night wind, and their shadows quivered, but every now and then she caught a sight of those gleams. She determined to go down the lane in the direction from whence they came.

She went a few steps, and then hesitated and stood still. On each side of the narrow path grew drooping trees which cast thick shadows. They grew more thickly together further on—thicker and thicker—darker and darker. How should she dare go on alone into the heart of that black avenue? And it was so silent, too, save for the shiver and whisper of the leaves, or the rare twitter of some startled bird. But as she hesitated the wind swept down towards her, and the boughs bent beneath it, and bending showed Esther the chimneys and thatched roof of a cottage not far distant. Clasping her hands

and looking neither to the right hand nor to the left she went on as quickly as the dim light permitted, and never stopped until she stood before the little gate of the white cottage. There was no light in any of the front windows; all the blinds were down, and there was nothing which told positively of the cottage being inhabited, yet Esther, looking across the garden to those four silent windows set in the white, gleaming wall, felt that her journey was ended. But where had the gleams of light come from? Her gaze left the front of the cottage, and she noticed a reflection on the grass as of light from a side window. She opened the gate and went in softly, and crept under the shadow of the hedge up towards the cottage. Yes, she was right, the light came from a low window at the side. It shone brightly on the dewy

grass, and as she crept up stealthily under the hedge she saw a shadow cross the surface of the reflection as though some one had passed for a moment between the window and the light. A few more steps and she was near enough to see the window itself; but oh, disappointment! the white blind was down!

Between the window and the hedge was a large rose-bush, and Esther went up to it and hid herself behind it. Although not a dozen feet from the window yet she was completely screened from sight herself, and was also able to see between the rose branches. But what was there to see? And who was there there whom she feared seeing her? Pressing closely against the rose bush heedless of the wet grass on which she knelt, and the branches heavy with rain drops that

dashed against her breast and face, she gazed at the lighted window. From time to time people passed in front of the light. Generally the shadow was a woman's, but once it was that of a man. Could it be Alan? So long and so fixedly she gazed out of the dark upon that glaring, white blind that the effect began to be mesmeric. She became drowsy, and as she leaned against the bush was almost unable to keep her eyes from closing. But one moment dispelled that feeling. Some one advanced to the window, pulled up the blind, and threw the window open. It was a white-haired, old man.

"Will that do?" she heard him say, and a sweet, childish voice replied—

"Oh, wider please—much wider—it is so hot here. I can scarcely breathe."

Was that the sick child speaking, wondered

Esther, who, out on the dewy grass, was shivering with cold?

There was a little silence. Esther crouching where the leaves were the thickest did not dare to look; but soon another voice spoke, and she trembled in every limb, for she had never before heard any but herself addressed by that voice in that tender tone of affection.

“Will that do, my darling?” and the child murmured—

“Oh, yes! it is so nice. Kiss me, dear!”

Esther thrust her hand through the branches. What did it matter if the thorns pricked her and tore her flesh? She must see. And what did she see when she had rent an opening in the rose-bush? Before her in the brightly-lighted room were two figures (for she saw none but them)—her

husband and that child. He was half-turning away from her (Esther) and kneeling beside a sofa, and within his encircling arm nestled the sick child. With his other hand he was caressing one of hers—such a white little hand it was! He said something too low for Esther to hear, and the child lifted her head slightly and looked lovingly up to him.

The light was shining full upon her, and Esther gazed at her with eager, devouring eyes, scanning each feature of the little face, so transparently fair now with her pale, golden hair falling about her and streaming over her dress.

As Alan and Ella looked then into each other's eyes Esther saw, with a shudder, what no one else had ever noticed—the likeness between father and child. Esther

strained every nerve of eye and ear, and let nothing escape her. The picture of that golden-haired child burned itself into her brain. Fifty years hence, should she live as long, she will be able to recall vividly to mind every minute detail of that scene—every wave of the golden hair, every fold of the dress; the fashion of the furniture, the flowers in the vase, and more than all the features of that little face which nestled on her husband's breast. The child's eyelids drooped. "She is tired," murmured Alan, smoothing tenderly the hair on her brow. "I had better go away and leave her; I will come again early in the morning."

Ella opened her eyes and looked up at him anxiously.

"And you won't go away and leave me? You promise you won't go away?"

“Not to-morrow, my darling.”

The child's face flushed and her lip quivered.

“Oh,” sobbed she, “not for many—many to-morrows. Promise me you won't go away. Let the old time come back again when you were here so often. I was never ill then. Why should you go? No one loves you as I do?”

Esther heard Alan's sigh. At first he did not answer, but Ella burst into tears, and Alan, in great distress, promised that as long as she was ill he would do what pleased her.

“And you will stay a long—long time?”

“Until you give me leave to go.”

“That will be never!” cried Ella, smiling through her tears.

“But I must really go now,” said he hastily. “Yes, I know you were asleep all

the afternoon, but it is quite time now that you were asleep again. I will come again early in the morning. God bless you my darling," and kissing her he left the room.

Alan had gone and Ella was alone. She lay with her eyes closed, she was not tired, only dreamy and languid. A noise startled her and she looked up.

There at the open window stood a tall pale woman gazing intently at her ; so white and still she was that the child shuddered with terror, she did not scream, she dared not.

Esther saw that the child shrank with fear, but she gazed at her unpityingly. I cannot tell what horrible thought possessed her as she stood there before this poor frail bar that lay between herself and her husband's love. She was *mad* that night, mad with cold and weakness, and loneliness bereft of all that this

golden-haired child possessed ! But Evangeline's good angel bent over her and the child burst into tears.

The drops seemed to fall upon Esther's heart, and she moaned and covered her face and turned slowly away, and then reminding herself that the child's sobs might be heard and the cause inquired into, hurried to the gate.

She had watched Alan leave the garden before she went up to the window, and now she must go back to the inn unobserved by him. How was it to be done? She was cramped and numbed with kneeling on the wet grass, and every movement gave her pain. Dragging her weary aching limbs along, keeping close under the shadow of the hedge she followed him. She wished that she were in front of him so as to be able to reach her

attic at the inn before he got there, but how was she to pass him? Once before him and her back to him all would be easy.

At last the opportunity she was waiting for came, Alan turned aside to strike a match for his cigar, and his wife swiftly and silently passed him, forgetting, in her anxiety, her pain and fatigue.

Twice she stumbled and caught at the railings to save herself, and then hurried feverishly on until she reached the inn. No one was in the entrance, the lights were half turned down, and she dragged herself up the stairs to the attic she had hired. When she went out that night she had left the candle burning, and now, as she re-entered it was flickering in the socket—one moment dying down to a speck, the next shooting up into a sudden flame and showing all the emptiness

of the cheerless room, the shadowy corners, the disordered furniture.

Esther blew out the dying light and sat down on the white bed. The moon gave light enough for her. Then she bent forward to listen. Yes! it was his step! She heard him say good-night.

There was a murmur from the landlady, and again Alan spoke in a loud cheery voice—

“Oh, he gives us great hopes. He says there is no disease, she wants great care, and she is not to remain here during the winter. He is going to see her to-morrow, he had to go over to Hellerton.”

Another murmur from the landlady, and then Alan—

“Thank you very much. No, I shall go the day after to-morrow certainly. Bye-the-

by, that London letter went in time I hope. Good-night."

Then his door shut and a sudden silence fell. What a horrible blank silence it was to Esther, sitting there alone in the moonlight. Well! she would leave early to-morrow morning. Go back to Holme and then—and then? But she would not trouble about that to-night. How her head burned! She was not cold now; and pouring out some water she drank it greedily, and then, with many pauses for rest, succeeded in undressing. She had drawn back the dimity curtain which hung before the little window, and the moon stared coldly in and gave her its light.

Oh the refreshment of that cold smooth pillow for her weary, throbbing brain! At once she sank into a heavy sleep, but it did not last long, and she awoke from it suddenly,

then slept again and dreamed wild nightmare dreams, and woke again ; and thus the night passed—a long weary spectre-haunted night.

At day-break she heard the servants go down and noisily begin their day's work. There was no train until nine, but she was in such a feverish haste to go that she thought she would get up then and dress. Yet when she tried to stand she became dizzy and would have fallen had she not caught at the bed.

“ It is only weakness,” she insisted to herself, remembering her fatigue of the day before and her untasted supper.

The supper was still there, and steadying herself by the furniture she made her way to it and endeavoured to choke down a morsel. It was a vain effort, her throat refused to

swallow, and with a sinking heart she went back to bed. There was a bell-pull near it, and she rang, but no one came. Then rang again and waited what seemed an age, straining her ears to catch the sound of footsteps on the creaking stairs. At last the bell was answered and the maid-servant, cross at being summoned at that hour by a lodger in the attic, knocked at the door.

“Oh, some tea please, a large cup as quick as you can,” begged poor Esther.

“Are you ill?” asked the girl bluntly.

“Oh, no! at least not particularly. I have a headache.”

“Well, I’ll bring it as soon as I get the kettle boiled.”

There was another weary half-hour before the tea came, and when Esther had drank it she resolved to make a fresh effort to get

dressed. What pain it gave to the weary limbs and aching brain !

Seven o'clock ! In another hour she ought to be on her way to the station. She had told the servant who brought the tea that she would require a conveyance of some kind to take her to the station. She had dressed herself as she sat on the bed. Could she walk now she wondered ? She stood up and went a few steps, but, turning suddenly giddy, stumbled and fell. Again she tried—and again—then crawled back to the bed and threw herself upon it in despair while the truth forced itself upon her.

She could not leave Exridge that day. The afternoon found her no better.

“It was only a violent headache,” she kept repeating to herself, and this she said to the maid-servant when she came up the long

stairs with the weak luke-warm¹ cups of tea which Esther drank so greedily. "Only a headache, I shall certainly be well in the morning."

But the headache became worse instead of better, and once or twice Esther woke suddenly from those short fits of heavy sleep wondering where she was, and, pursued by evil dreams, started up frightened. Was she really going to be ill—there in that strange place? And Alan was, perhaps, going back to Holme to-morrow, and she would not be there. What would he think? Oh, why, why had she come this journey? She tried to collect her thoughts. She reminded herself that if she were to become suddenly worse and insensible, there was nothing about her by which she could be identified. Who at

the inn would recognise the hieroglyphic which was embroidered on her clothes as "E. B.?" And her rings had nothing distinctive about them—a wedding ring—a half hoop of diamond, another of emeralds, and one of pearls. Ah! where was her pearl ring—that dear ring which Alan had given her only a month before? Had she taken it off in pique before she left the Priory? Perhaps she had, she could remember nothing plainly, or perhaps Alan had sent it to be altered, it was too large for her. She had no letter with her, no note-book. What money had she left? Her purse was in her jacket pocket at the other side of the room. She tried to remember what she had spent. Perhaps she had five pounds left, but that would soon go, and what would the landlady do with her then? Send her to the workhouse? and she gave a

shrill hysterical laugh as she pictured herself, lying in the whitewashed infirmary ward, one of a hundred perhaps.

And then would follow, of course, the pauper funeral ; and Esther groaned and buried her face in her pillow—and Alan would then be free—free to go back to that yellow-haired child—his but not hers !

At the thought of this the old mad jealousy possessed her again, possessed her with a sevenfold power. No ! if she were to die it should not be without a struggle for life first, she would not go away and leave him free, for the love of that child. But what was she to do ? Her thoughts flew as they always did in trouble to Robert and Cousin Bessie. Yes ! Cousin Bessie would come and nurse her and keep her secret.

On the dressing-table was paper, and pen,

and ink. Surely she could walk as far as that? She would write one line, bidding her come at once and tell no one. She went a few steps upheld by the fever with which every muscle was quivering, and then fell senseless to the ground.





CHAPTER XVII.

It was no very great surprise to Alan to receive that telegram from Exridge. The letters which had arrived lately had contained very indifferent accounts of Ella's health. Soon after his short summer visit to her, she had fallen into a languid state, and once or twice alarmed Mrs. Brooke by fainting. Alan would have given worlds to have been able to go down and see her, but when he mentioned something about "business in London," Esther discovered a thousand pretexts for his remaining at home just then; and much as he longed for a sight of his child, yet he remembered with delight that there had been a time, not long ago, when his wife

had parted from him only too unreluctantly. Could it be, thought he, that she was beginning to love him? So, with divided heart, he replied to Master Falconer's letters by excuses, and strove to persuade himself that the old man's kindly anxiety exaggerated the danger.

Then came the telegram, and Alan, bitterly reproaching himself, set off at once.

On the platform at Darton station he met Master Falconer. The old man looked so sad, that Alan stared at him in silence, dreading what news he might have to tell.

"Yes, she is alive," said he, in a low voice, answering the mute question, and as they drove to Exridge, Master Falconer talked sorrowfully of the little child, dwelling on her pretty ways, her wonderful unchildish wisdom, her sweet piety. Master Falconer, looking

straight before him, and talking thus, knew that the man at his side was sitting with bended head and wet eyes, but he would not spare him, nay, he even repeated twice, and commented upon the doctor's assurance that the child's ailment was not, primarily, a bodily one, but had been induced by some depressing mental causes—in fact, that the child was pining and fretting about something, or some one.

And so they drove into the village and up to the white cottage.

“Does she know I am coming?” asked Alan.

“No,” replied Master Falconer, quietly. “If she had expected you and you had not come after all, it might have killed her. You remember (or perhaps you have forgotten) that twice lately you wrote saying you were

coming to see her, and then wrote again saying you were prevented. It was then she began to have those fainting fits. But wait in the garden awhile sir. I shall soon prepare her. I think you are always uppermost in her thoughts." And treading with a soft womanly tread, he went within the cottage.

Alan was left alone with the autumn flowers. The little hand that had planted them might be dying, but they still bloomed. How pure the white asters looked. Alas! were they growing to deck a grave? And to Alan's fancy there arose a vision of those very flowers cut from their stalks and lying within his child's coffin. He heard a step upon the gravel, and turned again to meet Master Falconer.

* * * * *

From the moment of Alan's return Evan-

geline revived. He was to her what the sun was to her flowers, but the hand which she reached out to the angel of life was very feeble and trembling.

It was only in Alan's presence that she could be really said to *live*. When Alan was absent her soul sank back into a listless, torpid state, yet ready to arouse, radiant and joyous, to greet him the moment he returned. What was Alan to do? He did not love his child the less because he found that her very existence depended upon him, because he knew that were he to say that he should never see her again she would droop and *die*. He had a wild idea of taking his wife abroad, and there confessing all to her, and begging leave to go and fetch Evangeline; how could Ella help loving Esther, and how could Esther help loving Ella?

It was on the second day after his arrival, as he sat beside Ella, who was slumbering lightly, his hand within hers, that he proposed to himself this scheme. When the child sank into a deeper sleep he gently loosened his hand from her grasp, and walked away to the window. Yes, he would tell Esther the whole truth, and then he started to remember that he had never written to her since he left home. There was still time, it wanted yet an hour to post time, better to do it now.

Ella was asleep, and would sleep for some time. Yes, he would do it at once. But he had set himself no easy task, and the hour passed and found him sitting blankly before an unfinished letter. Unfinished? It was scarcely begun. His punishment had bitterly overtaken him. As he wrote he remembered

keenly the character of the woman to whom he was writing. Her high sense of honour, her perfect truth, and he remembered how he had loved her faithfully and patiently, and received for so long nothing but a cold fidelity. And then he dwelt upon the change which he had fancied lately in her manner towards him, and counted over again those trifles of deeds, and words, and looks that he had trusted were signs of a dawning affection. Perhaps he had been mistaken, and these little things which he had so cherished the remembrance of, were merely accidents of a moment. And if they were not so? Why—and Alan bowed his head upon his hand, and told himself that, if there was love in his wife's heart towards him, it must be so tender and fragile, a thing of so slight a growth, that it would be only too

easy to strike its death-blow. Yet he would not withdraw from his purpose—come what might he would write and send that letter. His child had a claim upon him, and he had a dim feeling that, in thus humiliating himself, he was making some reparation to her. When his heart sank and his pen refused its task, he turned and gazed at Evangeline, and the sight of her nerved him to proceed. She was lying as he had left her, sleeping quietly, her cheeks flushed and her lips apart, and the little white hand which had lain in his resting on the gay coverlet. “Poor pretty little Ella!”

* * * *

At last the letter was finished, and sent to Robert Brierly to forward. Alan was too well acquainted with the gossiping propensities of the Exridge postmistress to send

any of his letters from there except under cover to Robert Brierly. Mrs. Brooke alone had his real name and address.

At the time when Esther called at S. Lucien's in the vain hope of meeting Robert, that letter was lying at the curate's among a heap of others. Mr. Benson's orders were that none were to be forwarded except such as were marked immediate or private. The others were to await his return home. At the time Robert opened his letter and forwarded the enclosure to Mrs. Wybergh, Holme Priory, Severston, she to whom it was addressed was lying insensible at the inn at Exridge, only parted by a few inches of timber and plaster from the husband who had written it.

Before Alan had finished his letter Ella awoke. She lay silently watching him, won-

dering to whom he was writing. She had never heard him speak of anyone—sister, mother, friend—and she was glad of it. She liked to fancy that he belonged altogether to her. It was *business* which had kept him so much away from her lately, he had said so several times. She watched him finish his letter, then read it over, and read it over again, and she noticed the sigh with which he folded it up and put it into an envelope. He directed it, and then, laying the letter on the table, got up and left the room. He seemed absorbed in thought, and never turned to meet the enquiring gaze of those blue eyes. As soon as the door closed Ella got off the sofa and went to the table on which lay the letter. She was intensely curious to know to whom it was written. The direction was plain enough:—

“For my dear wife.”

The colour came to Ella's pale cheek, and she bit her lip. “Ah,” thought she, “then that is why he does not care for me as he used to do. He has a wife now, and perhaps little children of his own,” and Ella, overpowered by a feeling of great desolation, went back to the sofa, and turning her face to the wall, sobbed as though her heart would break.

Presently she heard “Master's” footstep, and choking down her sobs, she hid her face in the coverlet. But Alan did not notice her, he was in a great hurry, fearing lest he should lose another post; so hastily snatching up the letter and slipping it into the cover that was directed to Robert, he ran with it out of the house.

Poor little Ella! She pictured to herself

again and again those imaginary children of her dear "Master's," whom she supposed to have ousted her from his affections. Should she ever see them, she wondered? Would he some day take her to his house, and let her play with them, or wait upon them, and nurse them? She hoped they were good little children, for fancy the honour and happiness of living always with her dear Master, and belonging to him. Ah! she belonged to nobody! And so she became divided between a feeling of jealousy on the one hand, and on the other a yearning love for those visionary children.

She was so pale and quiet that night, so unusually languid and silent, that Alan became newly alarmed. Hitherto she had always roused herself in his presence, but that night she lay on her sofa heedless even

of her flowers, and the blue eyes only opened to seek Alan's face with a longing, questioning gaze, which he could not understand. When the next morning came, and Mrs. Brooke told him what an uneasy, feverish night the child had passed, Alan wrote to a great London physician, whom he knew by name, and begged him to come down without delay.





CHAPTER XVIII.

EXTRACTS from Alan Wybergh's diary:—

“Oct. 2nd.—Have just returned to the inn. Late though it is Ella would scarcely let me leave her. Poor little child, she clings more to me than ever. Thank God, Dr. Ellis speaks more hopefully. I think it would almost break my heart to lose her.”

“Oct. 3rd.—When I arrived at the white cottage this morning, Mrs. Brooke met me in great agitation, crying that Ella was worse, and had been wandering and delirious during the night. As I entered the room she stretched her arms towards me, and then bade Mrs. Brooke leave us alone. As soon

as the door was closed she said, 'As you went through the garden last night did you see anyone?' I thought a moment, and then answered positively, 'No.'

" 'You are quite sure?'

" 'Quite—why do you ask?'

" 'Oh,' said she, shuddering, 'then it must have been a ghost.' At this I laughed, and asked her what it had been like. But I laughed uneasily, remembering my own—what must I call it?—delusion of long ago."

" 'She was like this,' said the child, hiding her face in my shoulder. 'She was a tall woman, dressed in black, with long black hair, and such a white face; and she stared at me—oh, so horribly, as though she was looking through and through me. I could not take my eyes off her. And then she leaned on the window-sill, and I thought she

was coming to me, and I burst into tears. And when I looked again there was no one there. Oh, Master, what could it be ?’

“‘Did she speak at all ?’

“‘No—only *looked* at me, and never moved, except when she stooped and leaned against the window—it was open you know. Granny would keep stopping me when I wanted to tell her last night, and said it was all my fancy, but it was not fancy, Master dear.’

“‘If she came close to the window she must have left some footprints,’ said I, and I went up to examine it. But more rain had fallen during the night, and the ground was soft and smooth. I was just turning away when my eye saw something glittering on a patch of moss. I leaned out of the window and picked it up. It was a ring—a pearl

ring. I can never describe my sensations as I stood there with that ring in my grasp. Nearly nine years ago I had given a ring like that to my child's mother—poor Lily's only wedding-ring—and may God forgive me for breaking the solemn vows I made as I put that ring on her finger. Mrs. Brooke assured me it had been buried with her. Of course there are many other pearl rings in the world beside that; the pattern is common enough, most women have one of the kind. Esther chose one as my birthday gift to her a month ago (she had set her heart on a half-hoop pearl ring, and I could not persuade her to choose one of a different sort). I was roused by my child's voice. 'What is it, Master dear?'

"Your ghost has been no ghost at all," said I, trying to laugh gaily, 'at least, ghosts

don't wear rings. Some poor woman must have lost her way and wandered in here, and see what she has left you !' and I showed her the ring. My first impulse had been to hide it away, but then I thought that to show her the ring would be the quickest way of putting the idea of the ghost out of her head.

" ' Oh, Master, dear, give it me,' she cried, and then lay back on her pillow holding aloft the hand with the ring on it, admiring it and chattering gaily, wondering what Granny and Master Falconer would say. All her fears were forgotten. I wish I could forget.

" To-night, when I reached the inn, Mrs. Tomkins met me in great agitation.

" ' Oh, sir !' she cried, ' such a sad thing has happened.'

" ' What is the matter ?' I asked.

“ ‘ Oh, sir ! but perhaps you will step this way,’ and she motioned me into her private parlour, and then, seating herself in her arm chair, and fanning herself prodigiously, she went on—‘ A lady, sir, a visitor here (only arrived yesterday), has been taken suddenly ill. I was engaged in the bar at about 4.15 p.m., when Susan came rushing in—“ Oh, ma’am,” cried Susan, and then proceeded to say that the lady in No. 23 was very seriously ill ; she had had occasion to go to her room with a cup of tea, had knocked at the door, and, receiving no answer, had walked in, and there was the unfortunate lady stretched insensible on the floor. I sent for Mr. Jones at once. He said it was our joint duty to search her pockets for her address ; but I assure you, sir, there was not a scrap of paper about her by which she

could be identified. Her things are very good, very, but they are not marked ; she is totally insensible, and she has not got £5 about her. Not that we should turn her out if she was penniless, poor soul, and I simply mentioned it to you, sir, because of your room being beneath hers, and I thought if you should happen to hear any noise in the night you might be alarmed. Such a nice, affable lady too, and sweetly pretty—it's very sad, is it not, sir ?'

“ ‘ Very sad, indeed,’ replied I, ‘ but I trust she will soon recover. If she does not, her friends will no doubt send here to enquire why she does not communicate with them, and then you will, by opening the letter, which of course you will be at liberty to do under the circumstances, discover who she is.’

“ ‘ Then, you think, sir, that if letters come

here addressed to some lady unknown, I should open them ? ’

“ ‘ If she is not sufficiently recovered to be able to do so herself—or perhaps you had better ask Mr. Jones to do so.’ I also ordered her to spare no expense ; Tomkins is, I know, an excessively mean man, and one hears of such miserable instances of neglect sometimes—but why am I writing down all this ? This poor sick woman is nothing to me or my child, nothing more than any other poor creature might be who has been suddenly overtaken by sickness whilst among strangers, and at that most homeless of all earth’s halting-places—an inn. Perhaps I am glad to have any excuse for putting Ella’s ghost story out of my mind. The thought will force itself upon me that the pale visitor was the spirit of the child’s mother.

“Many times in the night I was disturbed by the moans of the sick woman.”

“October 4.—As I came downstairs to breakfast this morning, I met Mr. Jones on his way from the sick lady’s room. When I asked how she was he shook his head solemnly and replied, ‘Very ill.’

“I asked (thinking of Ella), what her complaint was, if it was likely to become anything infectious. To which he replied that he thought not; he anticipated brain fever.

“‘And you have discovered no clue as to who she is?’

“‘None whatever. Mrs. Tomkins sat up with her last night. I bade her take note of anything that the patient might say; but she says there was little but incoherent wander-

ings. As far as she could gather, she seemed to be seeking some one, but she could catch no name. One time, poor creature, she burst into tears, and entreated someone's forgiveness—her husband's, we think (she has a wedding-ring on); but I won't trouble you with this poor woman's case now when you are anxious to return to your sweet little charge. You need have no fear whatever of infection, I assure you.'

“From my child I turn in heart to my wife. She will have received my letter now. What does she think of me? How she will despise me! She who is so pure and truthful, how will she ever pardon my concealment? What will she say to me? She will, I know, pardon me; but in how cold a way—perhaps in the space of three lines. She may be writing to me now, sitting before the

little rosewood *secretaire* I gave her in the summer. And what will our meeting be? I have thought over her character a great deal the last three days, and have given up all hope of ever persuading her to look kindly upon Evangeline.

“No! we shall, most likely, never speak of the contents of that letter. We shall pretend to ignore it. Very likely, in her letter to me she will say, out of some feeling of generosity, that my confession (I know she will call it confession) shall never be alluded to by her. Yes; we shall feign to forget—we shall make a wild effort to be as we have been. Sometimes we shall nearly succeed, and then, looking into each other’s eyes, we shall remember we are only acting—that there is no confidence or trust between us, and never will be again.

“This sad train of thought was disturbed by Mrs. Tomkins, who came in, carrying my breakfast. She set it down, and then burst into tears.

“‘Oh, Mr. Alan, sir’ she cried, ‘I cannot bear it! To see that poor thing turning to me and begging of me to fetch her husband back to her; and saying how she will be such a different wife to him, and so loving, if he will only care for her again as he used to do, and she most likely not to live the day out.’

“‘Mr. Jones did not tell me that she was so seriously ill as all that. He spoke rather favourably of her.’

“‘Ah! perhaps he might to you; he thinks a deal of little Ella, and he knows you do, too, and he does not want to fret you. But he said to me if I cannot lessen the inflammation in three hours I shall not be able

to lessen it at all ; and she is so weak, poor soul !’

“ ‘ And you still have no clue as to who she is ?’

“ ‘ None ; but I found that she came from London. It was our boots’s nephew drove her the night Dr. Ellis came.’

“ Here Mrs. Tomkins was interrupted by someone calling from the upper stairs that she was to go up at once ; the lady was worse.

“ In another moment I heard Mrs. Tomkins despatching a chambermaid for the doctor. Then followed a silence only broken by the moan of the sick woman. I could not bear it, and, leaving my breakfast untasted, went out to Ella. She was very bright and happy, but I could not throw off the feeling of gloom which had oppressed me all the morning,

and I could not rid my ears of the moans of the dying woman. I told Ella about her. At least I said that there was a poor lady at Mrs. Tomkins' who was very ill, and she begged me to go into the garden and gather some flowers for her, and she amused herself by arranging them with fingers as deft as were her poor mother's."

"Oct. 5th.—The post has come in and brought me no letter from Esther. I had begun to dread what the answer to mine might be; but that there should be no answer at all never occurred to me. She might have written, if it had been only a single word.

"Mr. Jones considers the sick lady is a shade better. Mrs. Tomkins says that when the poor invalid saw the flowers that Ella brought she snatched them from her and

kissed them again and again, and would not let them be taken away from her. Ella was delighted when I told her this, and made another bouquet for me to take on my return at night.

“I have advised them to put an advertisement in the *Times* about her, and Mr. Jones is to draw it up. I have told Tomkins more than once not to be uneasy on the subject of his bill.

“If Esther persists in this silence I must go home to-morrow. The suspense makes me quite miserable. All day I have striven against the most dismal forebodings.”

“Oct. 6.—Again no letter! It is cruel of her—surely I have humbled myself enough. I shall start at eleven, and try to reach Holme to-night. I shall insist on a recon-

ciliation. When once I am in her presence I shall not leave it without her forgiveness. I knew she was proud, but I did not think her hard. I dread the parting with my poor little Ella ; but it would have to come some time.

“The sick lady is just the same. It was a happy thought of the child sending her some flowers. Mrs. Tomkins says it makes her cry to see the way the poor thing kisses them.”

“Oct. 7.—My brain is in a whirl, and I scarcely know how to write. I am here at the Priory once more ; yet alas !—but I will strive to begin at the beginning of this evil day.

“I left Darton at nine ; caught the right train when I got to London, and also found

time to send a telegram saying that I was returning; reached Severston at seven. The carriage was waiting at the station for me. The last time I returned home it was not waiting empty, as it was to-night. As I entered it I remembered saying to myself—‘Only one more hour, and then I shall have compelled my wife to forgive me.’ And as I drove along the dark road, I pictured to myself Esther’s queenly figure waiting to receive me. Perhaps she would be in the library, or, if her pride would not permit her to come downstairs, still I should find her in her *boudoir*, and her cold reserve would melt before my humble pleading. Thus persuading myself, I reached home. She was not in the hall—it was not likely that she would be so.

“ ‘There is a fire in the library, sir,’ said Evans.

“I know I stood some seconds outside the library door, dreading, yet longing, to see her. I opened the door and went in. The room was empty! Muttering to myself that she must be in her own room, I went upstairs. One room after another I entered, and all were dark and empty, and chilled me as the air from a vault.

“As I was returning downstairs again, perplexed and nervous, I met Rachael.

“‘Your mistress is out, I suppose?’ I said to her.

“The girl looked up with blank astonishment.

“‘My mistress, sir?’ repeated she.

“‘Yes, yes. She is out, I suppose—I cannot find her.’

“‘I thought she said she was going to you, sir,’ stammered Rachael.

“‘Coming to *me*? Mrs. Wybergh said she was coming to *me*?’

“I spoke in great excitement, and Rachael trembled as she replied—

“‘It was about a week ago that she left, sir, saying she was going to join you at Mr. Brierly’s. We have not heard from her since.’

“My head swam, and I clutched at the bannisters to save myself from falling; then I recollected myself, and muttered something to the effect that ‘I had been travelling about, and we had missed each other no doubt from that reason.’ Then I went down to the library, and shut myself in. I repeated to myself again and again—‘It was about a week ago that she left—we have never heard from her since.’

“Some one opened the door, and I turned

to the fire so that I might meet no prying eyes. Evans' voice said—'The letters, sir.' And I heard him arrange them leisurely at the table. Then he went away, and I turned to them eagerly. There was none from Esther.

"The first which caught my eye was my own letter to her—the letter that had cost me so much to write a week ago. It was lying there just as I had written it. And so that labour had been in vain; it had returned to me untouched; it was mine own again to keep or destroy. And there was one for her from Cousin Bessie. My heart sank afresh as I saw this, for I had begun to hope that Esther might be with her. But no! Cousin Bessie's letter was dated only two days ago. With Robert I knew she was not. Esther has so few friends, none

intimate except Cousin Bessie and Robert. Could she have gone to S. Margaret's? If she had gone away after reading my letter it would have seemed less strange; but even then she would surely have left some message.

"I sat brooding thus, and staring at the dying embers until midnight, utterly perplexed as to what to do. Then a sudden idea occurred to me. Might not Esther have left a note for me upstairs in some place—perhaps in her writing-case in her *boudoir* or within the leaves of some book that we were in the habit of using constantly?

"I went at once upstairs. The pale moonlight shone under her door, and for a moment it deluded my pulses into throbbing with hope, until I saw that it was *only* moonlight. As I opened the door and entered

the white uncurtained room I shuddered. My wife's room ! I went in softly, as one who treads in the presence of the dead. The writing-case was empty. There were some withered flowers in a vase on the table. Had *she* gathered them?

“ Before I came upstairs I fancied that I should look into some of her drawers, perhaps her desk, but as I put out my hand it trembled as guiltily as though I were urging it to some deed of sacrilege.

“ I could not do it. My eyes fell upon a little brown book which lay near the faded flowers. It was my wife's prayer-book. Esther was always excessively reserved about religious matters, but one Sunday, this summer, when I was ill she stayed away from church to nurse me, and I remember how she had brought this little book and asked half

timidly if I would mind her reading the Psalms for the day—*mind* it ! She sat beside me, one hand holding the book, the other hand in mine.

“Now in the lonely silent room I re-called the lulling tones of her voice and the sweet gravity with which she read. I thought I should like to read those Psalms again, and I took the book up and tried to find them. In turning a page I came upon a tiny frond of maidenhair fern. I remember one evening a month ago gathering her one such delicate fern as that, but it was scarcely likely Esther would have cared to preserve it. Yet strange to say it marked the very Psalms which I had been seeking, the Psalms she read to me when I was ill. It can only have got there by accident. Why should she care to preserve such a trivial gift as the fern, un-

less—but she did not love me—I have always known it.”

“October 8th.—Station Hotel, Severston.

“I have sent a letter by train to Robert containing full particulars, and have telegraphed to him to go and meet it. I have begged him to do what he thinks right and to send for me if necessary.

“He replied bidding me send at once a description of Esther’s dress that she wore when she left home, and he will communicate with Pollaky. I am to stay here at present. There is also a letter from Master Falconer. Ella continues better, but is greatly troubled about the poor stranger at the inn who is sinking rapidly. Mr. Jones does not expect that she will live the day out. When I write to Exridge I will suggest that

it would be well, in case she has not been identified before death, to have the remains photographed. I see Mrs. Tomkins has advertised as I advised her."

"October 9th.—In this morning's *Times* appeared the two advertisements side by side; Mrs. Tomkins, and my own:—

"'Missing since October 1, a lady aged twenty-three; tall, pale, very handsome features (rather Jewish type), black hair, dark grey eyes. When last seen was wearing a fashionably-made black bonnet, and black cashmere costume—linen marked with initials. For any information leading to the discovery of the above a reward of £100 will be given.'

"Then followed Mrs. Tomkins' advertisement—

"'There is at present in an Inn in Devon-

shire, a lady, name unknown, very seriously ill. She arrived dressed in a long black cloak and straw bonnet, and a plain stuff gown. Aged apparently thirty or more. Dark hair, high-colour.* She is known to have travelled from London, and it is feared from her manner is slightly deranged. No mark of name on clothing.'

"I was obliged to take poor Rachael into my confidence so as to make a careful description of Esther as she was when last seen. She is in terrible distress, she was really attached to her mistress. My senses are numbed. I keep thinking it is all some evil dream, and wondering when the awaking will come. Ah! God only knows what the awakening will bring. I try not to anticipate."

* Mrs. Tomkins did not mention the rings for fear, as she said, of arousing the greed of would-be relatives. Esther's "high colour" is accounted for by the state of the disease.

“October 10th.—At twelve o'clock I received a telegram from Robert, ‘A lady answering closely to the description stayed the night of October 1, at an hotel near S. Lucien’s. Come at once.’ I went by the next train and then straight to the Parsonage.

“Robert met me at the door. We clasped hands in silence, and I followed him into the study. He had nothing more to tell me than what was conveyed by the telegram. As we were sitting thus mournfully together some one knocked at the door.

“‘That is the landlady of the inn in King James’ Street, could you see her?’ said Robert.

“I was only too thankful. It was such a relief to be doing instead of *thinking*. So he left us together.

“She said that a lady answering my de-

scription stayed at her house one night and left early in the morning. She had with her a small brown travelling bag, finished off with gilt clasps and chain.—(Esther had such a one).

“‘Did you notice her purse?’ I asked.

“‘Yes, it was a small round one, either sealskin or velvet—’ (Another coincidence. May I dare to hope?) And she left early in the morning.’

“Yes! I have no doubt that it was Esther. Rachael has told me that she received a telegraphic message the morning after she left, bidding her send letters if there were any. Then came the agent from Pollaky’s and I had to endure the torture of a cross-examination. No wretched animal under the knife of a vivisector ever suffered keener agony. I shall never forget some of

the horrible questions he put to me—prefacing them always with the cold apology, ‘For form’s sake allow me to ask,’ or ‘You will pardon me, I am sure, but it will assist me materially to know from your own lips that—’

“After he left I was cowering over the study table feeling *crushed*. The agent had jotted down in his note-book my answers—but “only for his own eye” he assured me—when Robert’s entrance roused me. “A note from Rachael.” (Rachael came up in the same train with myself.) The note was dated from Reynolds’ refreshment rooms, ‘Please, sir, come at once. There is a woman here with her cloak on.—Rachael L.’

“Robert, taking my arm within his own, and looking anxiously at me, drew me on. I knew the house, it is not very far from S. Lucien’s.

“Rachael was waiting in the doorway, and ran to meet me. ‘There is a woman here with *her* cloak on, sir,’ she whispered, ‘she must be followed.’

“‘Are you certain?’ I asked.

“‘Quite. I made it myself,’ replied she, checking a sob. She went in and we followed. She led the way down a passage into a refreshment saloon. There were three or four men there and one woman, a tall, gaunt creature in a long cloak. She was sitting alone with her back to us, and apparently busy eating. I took a seat near her, and as I did so she turned angrily to the waiter and bade him be quick or she would lose the train. Something in the woman’s appearance seemed familiar to me, but when or where I had seen her I could not remember. And she was too much engaged eating

and drinking and sorting her parcels to notice me. I consulted with Robert in a whisper if I should challenge her on the spot with wearing my wife's cloak ; but he objected that he was sure it could not be sworn to, and proposed that when she left I should follow her. I did so, and contrived to get near her in the booking-office ; but there was a sudden push, and I was unable to hear the name of the place she took her ticket for, but watching her for a moment I saw her enter a Salisbury carriage, and I immediately took a ticket for Salisbury also, and went into the carriage next to hers. When the train was in motion I took out a long letter I had received from Master Falconer that morning, and which I had, as yet, been only able to glance over. Ella still remained better.

“I had gathered that before, but now I read the letter carefully at my leisure. In a post-script, which I had not observed at first, Master Falconer says he has opened his letter to inform me that news has just arrived that the poor sick lady is dead. The doctor gave up all hope yesterday. He will take care that my advice about having the remains photographed is followed. She had not been identified, and their present idea is that she had escaped from some lunatic asylum. Then the train stopped at a small station and I watched out of my window to see whether the woman I was following alighted. No! Then followed some more miles of rail and other stations when I again watched the door of the next compartment. Then came Salisbury, but still the woman did not get out. At the station that followed next I got out myself

and walked past her carriage and assured myself that she was still there, and took a ticket for some distant station of which I had never before heard. Then I began to realise that I was only a few miles away from my child. How delightful it would be if I could run over to Exridge and get a glimpse of her. And what if, after all, I was only going a fool's errand and Rachael was entirely mistaken about the identity of the cloak?

“I felt drowsy. It was dusk, and I had had a terrible day, when the train stopped, and to my astonishment the porter shouted ‘Darton.’ Darton! Then I had been actually asleep! We must have passed several stations; the woman I had been following might have escaped me. I threw open the door intending to walk past her carriage and see if she were still there or

not, when she herself got out, gave up her ticket and hurried through the station door. No vehicle of any kind was waiting outside, and lighting a lantern she set off to walk, I following in the distance. I scarcely knew if I was awake or if I dreamed; but there seemed nothing strange to me in the fact that she took the road to Exridge. It was quite dark, but I guided myself by the glimmer of her lantern, and gazed at the tall, black-cloaked figure whose shadow flickered and danced on the road until I was well-nigh fascinated. It seemed no marvel that she should go towards the inn. I followed. Was she going on to Hellerton? No! she paused at the inn door, put out her lantern, and entered as one familiar to the place. She went straight to the staircase—it was the same that led to my own rooms. The house

seemed unusually quiet, I thought, and then I remembered that the sick lady was dead. The woman paused on the landing beside my sitting-room door and began to empty her basket. She turned and glanced at me, and curtsied, and I recognised her at once as a crony of Mrs. Tomkins who acted as nurse, washerwoman, etc. Then she passed on her way upstairs, and I heard her knock gently at a distant door. It was opened, and some one came out on the landing, and I heard Mrs. Tomkins say, 'She is much better, I believe she will recover ;' and the woman said, 'That's a good thing. Did you know Mr. Alan was here ?' and—

“A voice that thrilled through me echoed,

“ ‘*Alan here !*’

“Ere a second passed I had mounted the stairs, and was kneeling beside my wife.

“Even to myself I cannot describe that meeting. It was life from the dead. Yes! far more than I had ever dared to dream or hope for; was it life from the dead. To-night as I sat clasping her hand she whispered—‘And you love me still?’ She smiled as she spoke, knowing that she had no need to ask. ‘And *you*?’ I asked in reply. Esther’s eyes met mine. My wife, at last after such patient waiting, is, indeed, my wife!

* * * * *

“She has several times begged me to let her explain how she came to Exridge; but I have forbidden her telling me anything until we are at home. I shall take her straight there as soon as she is well enough to be removed, and I shall tell her poor Lily’s history, and beg her to be kind to the little mother-

less child. Every morning the nurse brings in a lovely bouquet of flowers from the white cottage garden. Esther is always pleased to arrange them, and, strange to say, never asks where they come from. I have not seen my poor child since I returned.

“I had just written this when a message was brought to me that Master Falconer desired to see me. ‘Some entreaty from poor little Ella, no doubt,’ thought I, ‘for she knows I am here.’

“When I entered the sitting-room I found him standing with a spray of white roses in his hand.

“‘You look ill, my friend,’ said I, ‘and how is Evangeline?’

“‘Evangeline sent you these,’ he answered, his voice trembling and laying the rose spray in my hand.

“ ‘And how is she?’

“ He sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands and cried—

“ ‘Evangeline is *dead*.’

* * * * *

“ I have been to the cottage and laid a cross of white asters on my child’s breast. My wife made it. I have told her all.”





CHAPTER XIX.

'Two years have elapsed, and a new picture has been hung in the library at Holme Priory. It is executed (so the Royal Academy critics for the year said) in Millais' happiest style.

It is the portrait of Queen Esther. She is more queenly now than ever, for resting on her knee and encircled by her arm is a new realm which owns her sway. A noble boy gazes at you from the picture, with his mother's eyes and his father's smile. One dimpled child-hand nestles in hers; the other holds a long tress of golden hair. The shining hair falls on the child's plump naked knee, and, rippling over, seems to kiss the encircling arm of the mother. Her face, as she

looks down upon him, wears a serene smile of perfect contentment.

“A tress of golden hair!” It was at Esther’s desire that it was put into her child’s hand. And so the poor little half-sister, who sleeps in that far-off churchyard, and who longed so much to see her dear “Master’s” children, is united in death with Esther’s beautiful boy. But will he ever fill the place in his father’s heart that was filled by Evangeline?

I picture to myself a day when Alan and his heir shall be walking hand-in-hand, and, as Alan gazes down proudly upon his noble boy, he will break impatiently from his father’s grasp and bound away, intent upon some childish merriment. Alan’s eyes will follow with pleasure the vigorous, manly little figure, and he will be ready to applaud

his achievements, and delighted to catch the glance of the bold self-reliant eye; but to his deserted hand will come, in remembrance, a softer, gentler pressure than his boy's, fingers smaller and feebler will cling to his, a quieter presence will soothe him, and his never-to-be-forgotten daughter will rest her head again upon his heart.

THE END.

R

